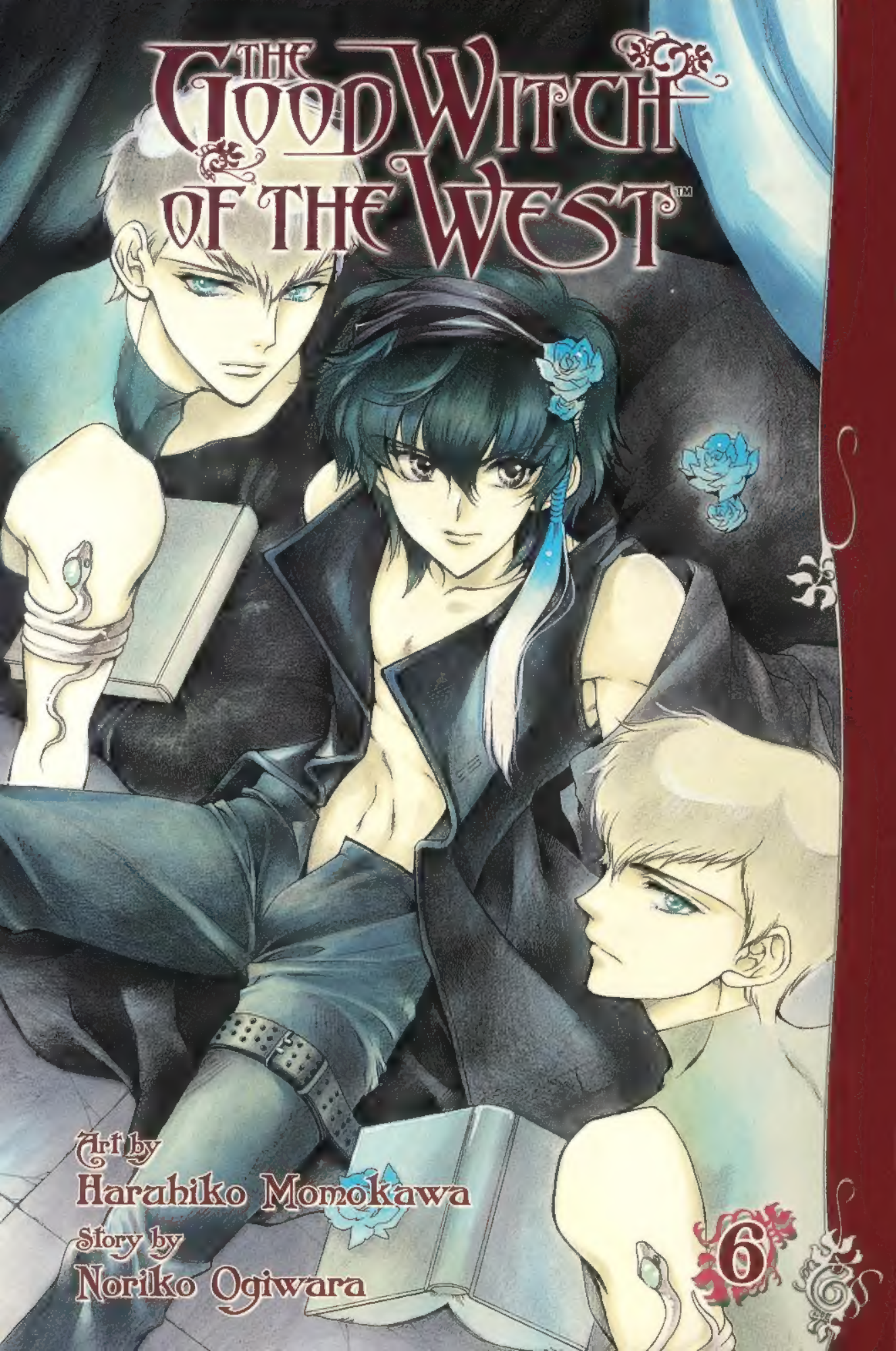
THE GOOD WITCH OF THE WEST™
Art by
Harahiko Momokawa
Story by
Noriko Ogiwara
6

The Good Witch of the West Volume 6

Story By Noriko Ogiwara

Illustrated by Haruhiko Momokawa

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THE GOOD WITCH OF THE WEST™

Story by Noriko Ogiwara
Art by Haruhiko Momokawa

Volume 6

Story so far in

THE GOOD WITCH OF THE WEST™

The Star Queen Astraea rules Graal, a fairy-tale kingdom in which good and the Light prevail. Heretics are condemned with the utmost fervor. But one of the daughters of the Star Queen, Edilene, chose a heretic as a lover and was banished with him to a cold tower in the harsh highlands of Sera field.

Years later, fifteen-year-old Firiel Dee, daughter of the reclusive Professor Dee and the late Edilene, learned she was a Queen-in-Waiting, a potential heir to the throne of Graal, when an unusual heirloom necklace was recognized at the Roland family ball as proof of her royal blood!

Soon after, her father went missing and her home was destroyed. She joined a finishing school to please House Roland in order that they might protect her friend Rune from her father's enemies. But none could protect Rune from himself when the Roland entourage went to the palace at Hieraglion and Rune slayed his heretical tormentor, Duke Riez.

Firiel chases Rune to the south, where she learns his story and of the Wall...

Main Characters

Firiel

Rune

Adale

Eusis

Professor Dee

Lot

Tabitha and Bo Holy

Leandra Cheviat

Marie

Main Characters

Ravenna

Igraine

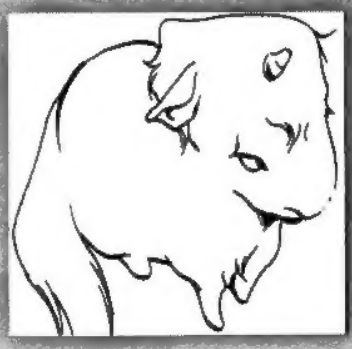
Vincent

Cisaria

Margot and
Owen Roland

Liamon Riez

Bard



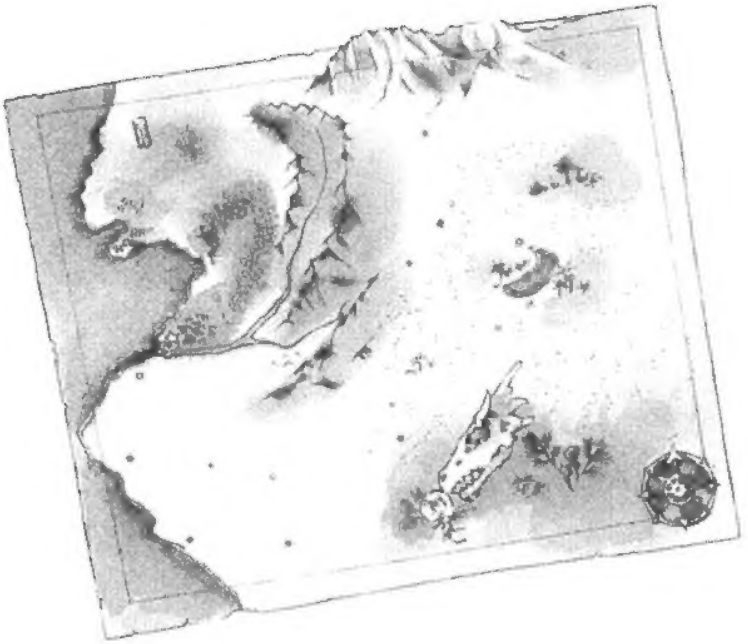
Ruu

Augusta

Prophecy

The Good Witch of the West
and the Brave King of the East
summoned a wise man and a poet,
then traveled to an icy city.
The end begins when the
midday star falls from the sky.
Who is standing behind you?
That...

(from a children's tale in Fenisten)



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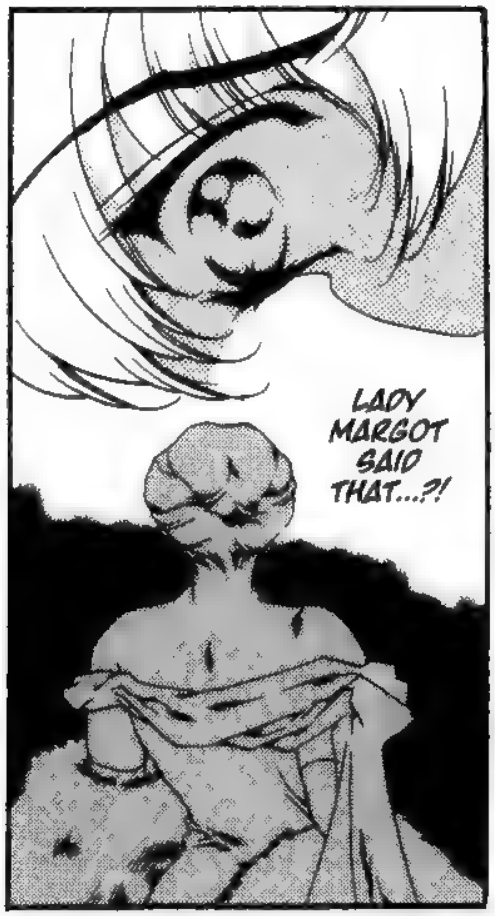
Chapter 26:
The Forest at the End of the World

NO ...!
RUNE...
...A PART OF THE CIRCLE OF HERMES...?!

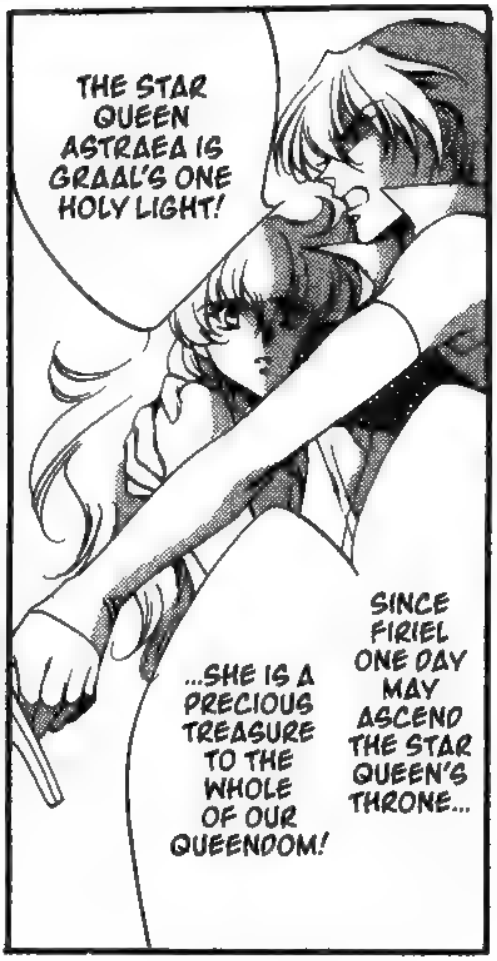
AFTER ALL THE NIGHTMARISH THINGS THOSE PEOPLE DID TO YOU, HOW COULD YOU JOIN THEM?!
IT'S NOT LIKE THAT! I--
THAT IS QUITE FAR ENOUGH, RUNETTE.
FINALLY, YOU EXPOSE WHO YOU TRULY ARE--
YOU CAN'T BE! HOW COULD YOU?!
THAT'S JUST NOT RIGHT !!

A DANGEROUS MINION OF EVIL! I SUSPECTED AS MUCH.
NO LIGHT EVER COMES CLOSE TO PIERCING THE DARKNESS IN WHICH THEY RESIDE.
THE STAFF OF THE SERPENT IS AN ORGANIZATION MORE STAINED BY HERESY THAN ALL OTHER OUTLAWED GROUPS COMBINED.
YOU MUST NOT ALLOW YOURSELF TO STAND SO CLOSE TO SO TAINTED A CREATURE AS HE!
FIRIEL, TO MY SIDE, IF YOU PLEASE!
YOU BEAR THE BLOOD OF ROYALTY.
HER MAJESTY THE STAR QUEEN HERSELF DESPISES THEM ABOVE ALL OTHERS, DECLARING THAT THEY BE ERADICATED WHEREVER THEY ARE FOUND.


LADY MARGOT SAID THAT...?!

...THEN I AM TO ELIMINATE YOU.

RUNETTE, THE COUNTESS ENTRUSTED ME WITH A SPECIAL ORDER IN REGARDS TO YOU.
SHOULD YOU APPEAR BEFORE FIRIEL...
...AND SHOULD SHE ATTEMPT TO FOLLOW WHEREVER IT IS YOU WOULD LEAD HER...


THE STAR QUEEN ASTRAEA IS GRAAL'S ONE HOLY LIGHT!
SINCE FIRIEL ONE DAY MAY ASCEND THE STAR QUEEN'S THRONE...
...SHE IS A PRECIOUS TREASURE TO THE WHOLE OF OUR QUEENDOM!

SHE MUST NOT FALL INTO THE HANDS OF DARKNESS!
I'M WARNING YOU, IF YOU KILL RUNE...
...THEN I'LL KILL YOU!!
IGRAINE! ENOUGH!!

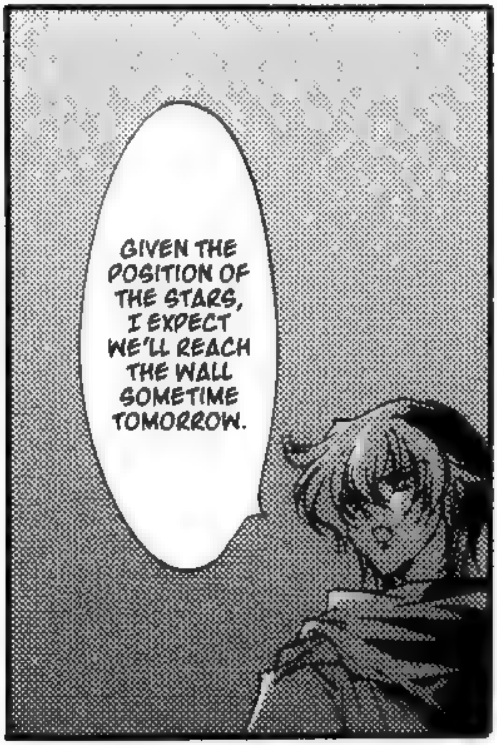
RUNE, I'M GOING WITH YOU TO FIND THE WALL.
FIRIEL!!
THE ONLY REASON I CAME SOUTH WAS TO FIND RUNE.
THE DANGER DIDN'T MATTER TO ME.
IF IT MEANT THAT I COULD SEE HIM ONE MORE TIME, THEN I WOULD HAPPILY HAVE GIVEN MY LIFE.
BUT NOW THAT WE'RE FINALLY TOGETHER AGAIN, YOU SAY "GOODBYE" AND TELL ME TO GO HOME? NO. I WILL NOT ACCEPT THAT!
PLEASE, RUNE.
TAKE ME WITH YOU TO THE WALL.

huff
SO HOT!
RUNE...

IS IT... REALLY TRUE?

DOES THE PATH WE'VE WALKED TOGETHER FOR SO LONG REALLY END HERE?

NO... IT CAN'T BE...


GIVEN THE POSITION OF THE STARS, I EXPECT WE'LL REACH THE WALL SOMETIME TOMORROW.

IF I WERE TO SAY THAT I'D JOIN THE CIRCLE OF HERMES, TOO...
RUNE...
...WOULD YOU TAKE ME WITH YOU?
I DON'T BELONG IN THE PALACE OR THE COURT. I DON'T WANT TO BE THERE!
WHERE I WANT TO BE...
DON'T BE STUPID.
A GRAND-DAUGHTER OF THE STAR QUEEN COULDN'T POSSIBLY WANT TO JOIN THE STAFF OF THE SERPENT.
MY BLOOD HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS!

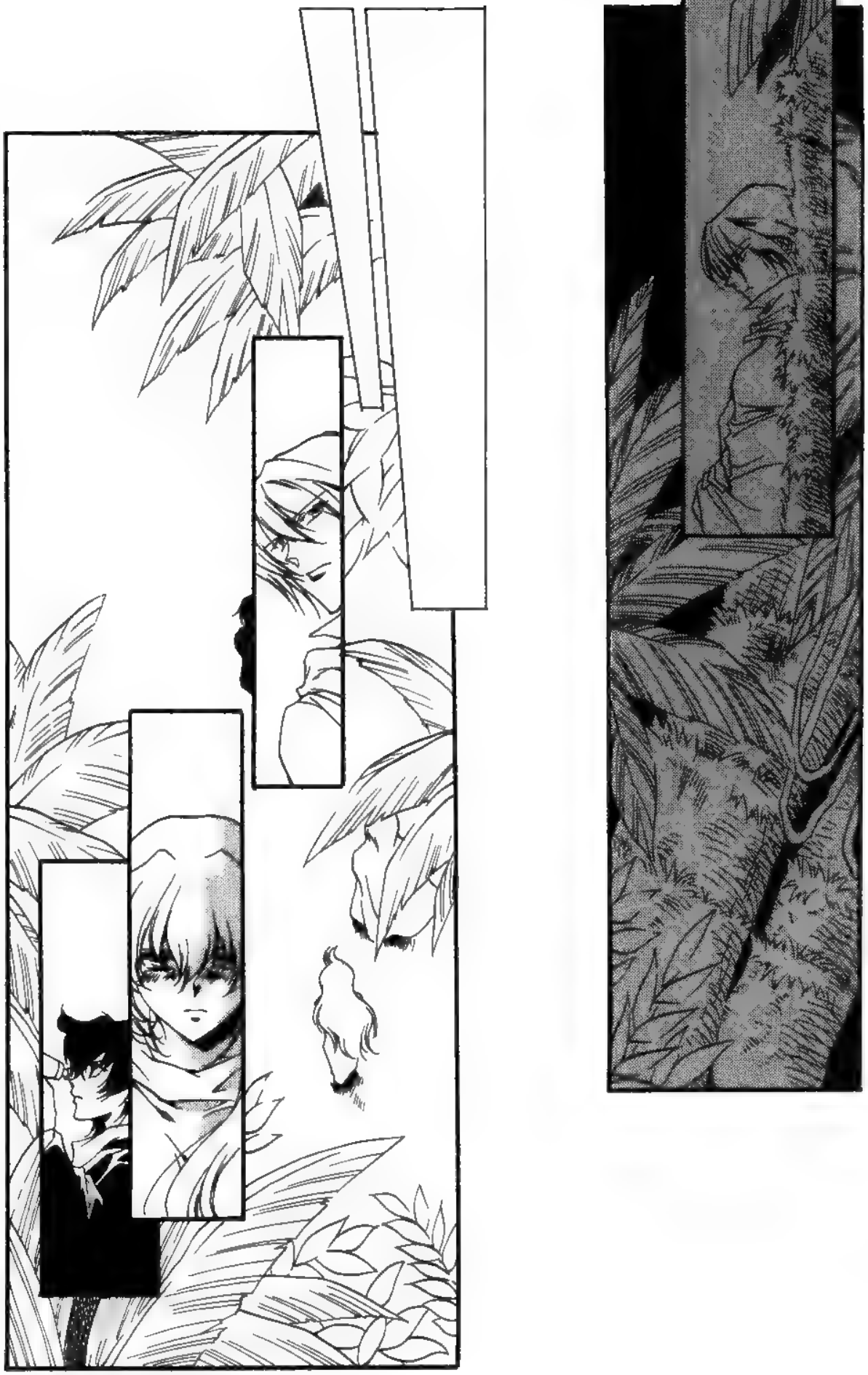
THE ONLY PLACE I WANT TO BE IS BY YOUR SIDE!
TAKE ME WITH YOU!
...HAVE BEEN THE BRIGHT GUIDING LIGHT IN MY LIFE.
DUKE RIEZ AND HIS CRONIES ...
...WERE JUST A SMALL, FANATICAL FACTION OF THE CIRCLE OF HERMES.
...FIRIEL, YOU...
...ONLY YOU...
EVER SINCE WE WERE LITTLE...

WHEN I RAN FROM THE PALACE...
...THE STAFF OF THE SERPENT MEMBERS THAT FOUND ME WEREN'T PART OF THAT GROUP. THEY WERE SOME OF THE TRUE RESEARCHERS.
THE "TRUE RESEARCHERS"?
YES.
YOU SEE, IN GRAAL, KNOWLEDGE IS THE PROPERTY OF THE STAR QUEEN.
ALL OF IT IS GATHERED UP AND SEALED AWAY DEEP WITHIN THE PALACE.
ONLY A VERY FEW PRIVILEGED NOBLES ARE EVER ALLOWED ACCESS TO THAT KNOWLEDGE, AND EVEN THEN, IT IS ONLY A TINY FRACTION OF THE WHOLE.
IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING THAT NONE OF IT EVER FILTERS DOWN TO THE PEASANTRY.

I'M NOT SAYING THAT IS NECESSARILY A BAD THING IN AND OF ITSELF.
EVEN THOUGH KNOWLEDGE IS SO RESTRICTED...
...THE STAR QUEEN HAS STILL GIVEN HER SUBJECTS PEACE. PEOPLE IN GRAAL LIVE HAPPILY AND COMFORTABLY...
...AT THE FEET OF THE "GOOD WITCH OF THE WEST."
BUT NOT ALL CAN ABIDE THINGS THE WAY THEY ARE.
THEY COVET HER KNOWLEDGE.
THESE PEOPLE ARE POSSESSED BY THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH.
THOSE WHO SEEK KNOWLEDGE, DESPITE IT BEING FORBIDDEN.
THE STAFF OF THE SERPENT...
...ALSO CALLED THE CIRCLE OF HERMES, IS AN ORGANIZATION MADE UP OF EXACTLY THAT KIND OF PEOPLE.
THE PROFESSOR AND I ARE THAT KIND OF PEOPLE.

IT WAS A PLACE WHERE WE COULD FOLLOW THE LIGHT OF TRUTH WITHOUT FEAR.
BEING THERE...
BEING AT THEIR HEADQUARTERS WAS LIKE BEING BACK AT THE OBSERVATORY WITH THE PROFESSOR. IT FELT FAMILIAR. COMFORTING.
BUT I'M NOT. I DON'T HAVE THE POWER TO PROTECT YOU THERE.
BESIDES, MOST OF MY TIME MUST BE SPENT SELECTING A FIELD OF STUDY AND THE MAN WHO WILL BE MY MENTOR.
I...
I BELONG THERE, FIRIEL. WITH THEM.
IF I WAS SLIGHTLY OLDER, THEN MAYBE I COULD TAKE YOU WITH ME.

I CAN'T TAKE YOU WITH ME, FIRIEL.
...ARE YOU SAYING I'LL ONLY BE IN YOUR WAY WHERE YOU'RE GOING?
THAT YOU'RE CHOOSING YOUR RESEARCH... OVER ME?



LOOK!
THAT BIRD JUST AVOIDED SOMETHING, AND THERE'S NOTHING THERE!
THE WALL! THAT HAS TO BE WHERE THE WALL IS!
I JUST KNOW IT!
WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE STARS HAS GOTTEN INTO HIM?
HE ALMOST APPEARS HAPPY. IS THIS HIS WAY OF FROLICKING?
DAMMIT!! MY COMPASS IS ALL OVER THE PLACE! USELESS!
PERHAPS THERE'S SOMETHING NEARBY THAT INTERFERES WITH MAGNETIC CURRENTS... HMM!

FIRIEL, COME LOOK.
THIS IS THE WALL.
I KNOW IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE ANYTHING'S THERE, BUT IF YOU PLACE YOUR HAND LIKE SO... CAN YOU FEEL THE RESISTANCE?
EVEN THE TREE BRANCHES GROW AWAY FROM IT.
WOW, THEY DO. HOW STRANGE!

THIS IS IT, FIRIEL! THIS IS THE WALL! THE PROFESSOR AND I HAVE WANTED TO SEE THIS FOR SO, SO LONG!
I WONDER WHAT ITS PURPOSE IS?
AND WHAT IN THE WORLD COULD IT BE MADE OF?
SUCH A REMARKABLE PHENOMENON!
RUNE...

TO RUNE, RESEARCH IS AS NATURAL AS BREATHING.

THERE'S NOTHING TO DO BUT TO GIVE UP, I GUESS.

I CAN'T GET IN THE WAY OF THAT.

FIRIEL, HOW THE HECK DID YOU PASS THROUGH THE WALL?!
I HAVE NO IDEA!
HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO GET BACK?!
THERE HAS TO BE A WAY! THE DRAGONS GET THROUGH-- MAYBE THERE'S A BREAK SOMEWHERE.
RUN YOUR HAND ALONG IT AND SEE IF YOU CAN'T FIND A--

SLAM
FIRE!!

FIRIEL, RUN!!
LAST I REMEMBER, I WAS IN THE SOUTHERN FOREST, WITH A HERD OF DRAGONS STAMPEDING RIGHT AT ME...
WH-WHAT HAPPENED TO ME...?
SO AM I... DEAD?
IS THIS THE PLACE WHERE SOULS GO...? THE PARADISE AMONGST THE STARS?

Chapter 27:
A Planetary Paradise

AAH, EXCELLENT.
YOU HAVE AWAKENED.

!!
UNPH!
PLEASE, KEEP STILL. YOU SHOULD NOT TRY TO MOVE SO QUICKLY.
CAN YOU REMEMBER YOUR NAME?
YOU'RE QUITE THE RECKLESS LITTLE DOE, DIVING DOWN A ROAD THOUGH YOU BE NAUGHT BUT FLESH AND BLOOD.
IT'S A WONDER YOU DIDN'T COMPLETELY DISCORPORATE YOUR ENTIRE CELLULAR STRUCTURE.
WHO... ARE YOU?

I AM HER MAJESTY'S BARD.
MY WORK IS TO GATHER INTERESTING SONGS FROM HERE AND THERE.
...DAUGHTER OF QUEEN ANN.
THIS IS A DECIDEDLY PECULIAR INCIDENT, TO BE SURE...
!

IN OTHER WORDS, I BECOME HER MAJESTY'S EYES, HER MAJESTY'S EARS...
...AND WANDER THE WORLD IN HER STEAD.
AH, THERE. WE HAVE ARRIVED.
THIS IS THE TOWN OF ELROY.
"ELROY" ...?
TO THE NORTH AND EAST OF US LIES THE NATION OF TOLBAT.
ELROY IS BUT A SMALL TOWN ON THE VERY FRINGES OF THAT COUNTRY'S DESERT.
WE'RE BY THE DESERT ?!
NO WAY! THAT CAN'T BE POSSIBLE!
JUST A FEW MINUTES AGO, I WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FOREST AT THE SOUTHERN EDGE OF THE WORLD!

GETTING FROM THERE TO HERE TAKES OVER A MONTH ON FOOT!
HOW COULD I HAVE CROSSED THAT DISTANCE IN JUST A FEW SECONDS?!
THAT, MISS FIRIEL, IS SOMETHING I CANNOT DIVULGE TO ANYONE BUT THE NEXT STAR QUEEN.
ポー
EVEN THOUGH I'M THE ONE TO BLAME FOR THIS INCIDENT.

...OPENING IT ONCE AGAIN FOR YOU.
THE STONE YOU CARRY MUST HAVE RESONATED WITH THE REMNANTS OF THE ROAD...
LIKE YOU, I WAS ALSO IN THE SOUTHERN FOREST EARLIER TODAY.
MY BUSINESS THERE CONCLUDED, I CONSTRUCTED A ROAD IN THE VICINITY OF THE WALL AND TRAVELED HERE.
THAT THE FIREWALLS I PUT IN PLACE AFTER I CLOSED THE ROAD WERE ENTIRELY INSUFFICIENT TO PREVENT YOUR PASSAGE IS MY FAULT ALONE.
THOUGH REST ASSURED, I CORRECT MY MISTAKES. PLEASE ALLOW ME TO RETURN YOU TO THE SPOT FROM WHENCE YOU CAME.
AND MISS FIRIEL? I THINK YOU WOULD DO WELL TO FORGET THIS EVER HAPPENED.
THAT WOULD BE THE SAFEST, WISEST CHOICE FOR YOU.

AND HOW COULD YOU EXPECT ME TO?! THE STAR QUEEN IS BEING TOTALLY UNFAIR! ALL THE SO-CALLED "HERETICAL" INFORMATION AND THIS "MAGICAL ROAD" STUFF YOU'RE BABBLING ABOUT...
...SHE CAN'T JUST KEEP THAT ALL TO HERSELF!
HOW COULD I FORGET THIS?!
IT'S NOT JUST RUNE AND THE STAFF OF THE SERPENT!
IF A MYSTERY IS SITTING THERE IN FRONT OF SOMEONE, IT'S ONLY NATURAL FOR A PERSON TO WANT TO KNOW MORE!
SHE'S DEPRIVING PEOPLE OF THEIR RIGHT TO KNOW!

RUNE ISN'T EVIL!!
JUST WANTING TO KNOW...
...ISN'T EVIL!
ｸﾝ
AND YOU'LL NOT FOLLOW ME!
AND DON'T EVEN THINK OF FOLLOWING ME!
MISS FIRIEL?
GOODBYE, BARD!
THANK YOU FOR YOUR OFFER, BUT I'LL FIND MY OWN WAY BACK SOUTH!

HOW INTRIGUING.
THE RESEMBLANCE IS STRIKING...
...TO YOUR GRANDMOTHER CONSTANCE, THAT IS.
YOU'RE HORRIBLE!
YOU AND MY LADY MOTHER BOTH!
ELROY

PEOPLE— I'VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE IN MY LIFE.
AN UTTERLY UNFAMILIAR TOWNSCAPE.
I'M REALLY, REALLY FAR AWAY FROM ANYTHING I KNOW, AREN'T I...?
I DIDN'T EVEN HAVE THE CHANCE TO SAY GOODBYE.
HEY THERE, LITTLE MISSY. WHAT'S WRONG?
FIRIEL, RUN!!
RUNE.

GET IN A QUARREL WITH YOUR MAN?
YEAH. HELL, COME WITH US AND WE'LL EVEN BUY YOU A PROPER NEW DRESS.
WHY DON'T YOU COME HAVE SOME FUN WITH US INSTEAD? WE'LL TREAT YOU RIGHT.
EXCUSE ME, GENTLEMEN. THIS YOUNG LADY IS MY COMPANION.
LET GO OF ME!
UGH. THEY REEK OF ALCOHOL!
WHA--? HEY!
SO HOW'S ABOUT IT, MISSY? WE'RE ALWAYS REAL NICE AND GENTLE WITH PRETTY YOUNG LADIES.

I AM AFRAID I MUST INSIST. YOU SEE, SHE IS NOT YET OF AGE TO PROPERLY ACCOMPANY A GENTLEMAN TO A DRINKING ESTABLISH-MENT.
YOU ALL LOOK TO BE UPSTANDING MEMBERS OF THE MILITARY. PLEASE, BE SO KIND AS TO EXCUSE HER.
HUH?
YOU A MIN-STREL?
BEAT IT, YA FOP. SHE'S OURS!
WE WERE SEPARATED BY THE CROWDS FOR A MOMENT, IS ALL.
SEE? SHE IS QUITE YOUNG.
WAH!

HERE. BY WAY OF APOL-OGY...
...PLEASE ALLOW ME TO PLAY A RARE OLD SONG FOR YOU.
OH MY...
HAVE HER MAKE ME A CAMBRIC SHIRT,
PARSLEY, SAGE, ROSEMARY AND THYME.
WITHOUT NO SEAM NOR FINE NEEDLEWORK,
AND THEN SHE'LL BE A TRUE LOVE OF MINE.
TELL HER TO WASH IT IN YONDER DRY WELL,
PARSLEY, SAGE, ROSEMARY AND THYME.
WHERE NEVER SPRUNG WATER NOR RAIN EVER FELL,
AND THEN SHE'LL BE A TRUE LOVE OF MINE.

WHEN HE HAS DONE AND FINISHED HIS WORK,
PARSLEY, SAGE, ROSEMARY AND THYME.
ASK HIM TO COME FOR HIS CAMBRIC SHIRT...
...FOR THEN HE'LL BE A TRUE LOVE OF MINE.
HIS VOICE... IT REGO-NATES.
IT RIPPLES THROUGH THE MARKETPLACE DIN, LEAVING THE AIR CALM--MUCH LIKE A PURE DROP OF DEW SOAKING ONTO PARCHED EARTH.
TELL HER TO DRY IT UPON YONDER THORN,
PARSLEY, SAGE, ROSEMARY AND THYME.
WHICH NE'ER BORE BLOSSOM SINCE ADAM WAS BORN,
AND THEN SHE'LL BE A TRUE LOVE OF MINE.
ASK HER TO DO ME THIS COURTESY,
PARSLEY, SAGE, ROSEMARY AND THYME.
THEN ASK FOR A LIKE FAVOR FROM ME,
AND THEN SHE'LL BE A TRUE LOVE OF MINE.

HURRAH!
THAT'S ONE IMPRESSIVE VOICE YOU HAVE THERE, SIR MINSTREL!
I LOVED IT! THAT WAS BEAUTIFUL!
COME SING AT MY INN, I BEG YOU!

WOW. YOU SURE DO EAT A LOT.

IPH PHAA PHO?

HERE YOU GO! FIVE EXTRA-THICK SLICES OF PIE!
UMM... I TAKE IT YOU'RE A LITTLE FOND OF SWEETS, THEN...

OF COURSE.
I CONSUME SUGARS AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE. THEY, ALONG WITH CARBO-HYDRATES, ARE AN IMPORTANT SOURCE OF ENERGY FOR BRAIN CELLS.

EVEN FOR A ROYAL BARD, YOU REALLY USE A WHOLE LOT OF WORDS I'VE NEVER HEARD OF.
"BRAIN CELLS"...?
"CARBO-HYDRATES"...?
THIS WHOLE TOWN IS WEIRD. HOW COME A TINY LITTLE DESERT TOWN LIKE THIS IS SO LIVELY? THERE SHOULDN'T BE SO MANY PEOPLE HERE.
YOU AREN'T THE ONLY STRANGE THING HERE, EITHER.
WAIT! HOLD ON A MINUTE!
WHAT ...?
THAT CAN'T BE RIGHT! YES, BRIGION IS INVADING TOLBAT RIGHT NOW...
...BUT ELROY IS WAY, WAY OFF THE SHORTEST BRIGION-TOLBAT ROUTES!
THE GENTLEMEN IN THE RICHLY COLORED UNIFORMS WE ENCOUNTERED EARLIER...
...THEY WERE SOLDIERS FROM THE BRIGION ARMY.
AH, THAT?
THAT WOULD BE BECAUSE THE ARMY'S HERE.

THE ONLY REASON THE BRIGION ARMY MIGHT COME AROUND THAT FAR SOUTH IS IF THEY WERE THINKING OF INVADING GRAAL--

I HIGHLY RECOMMEND YOU TRY THIS PIE, MISS FIRIEL. IT'S SCRUMPTIOUS.
はぐ
はぐ

HER MAJESTY KNOWS, DOESN'T SHE?

...ARE WORKING AS HARD AS THEY POSSIBLY CAN TO COME UP WITH SOME WAY, ANY WAY, OF STOPPING BRIGION'S CONQUESTS.
RIGHT NOW, LEANDRA AND ADALE...
...HER OWN GRAND-DAUGHTERS...
...USING THE BARD TO LEARN EVERYTHING ABOUT WHAT BOTH THE ENEMY AND HER GRANDCHILDREN ARE DOING.
BUT THE STAR QUEEN SITS ON HIGH, ALOOF AND ALONE...
SHE PROBABLY JUST GOT COMPLETELY FED UP WITH THE WHOLE ROYAL SYSTEM.
I THINK I UNDERSTAND NOW WHY MOTHER DECIDED TO GIVE UP BEING A QUEEN-IN-WAITING.
ALL THIS, JUST TO DECIDE THE NEXT QUEEN.
MAYBE SHE WANTED TO LOOK UPON HER DAUGHTERS WITH THE WARM EYES OF A MOTHER, NOT THE COLD, CALCULATING EYES OF A QUEEN WHO MUST CHOOSE A WORTHY SUCCESSOR.

THE PRINCESS EDILENE CERTAINLY WAS AN INTRIGUING WOMAN. I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO MEET HER ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION.
YOU WHAT?!
THE IMPRESSION SHE LEFT ON ME WAS THAT OF A WOMAN CAPABLE OF PUSHING THIS AGE FORWARD INTO THE NEXT.
ALL HUMANS ARE BORN WITH AN INNATE DESIRE FOR PROGRESS, YOU SEE.
EDILENE HAD CONSIDERABLE INTELLECT.
IT LED HER TO CONCLUDE THAT THE KEY TO WORLD REVOLUTION LAY WITH HER JOINING HER FUTURE TO THAT OF PROFESSOR DEE.
HER HUMAN INSTINCT FOR ADVANCEMENT HEAVILY INFLUENCED THAT CHOICE.

HOWEVER, WHEN THE PROGRESS SHE SO STRIVED FOR IS FULLY REALIZED...
...THIS WORLD WILL END.
HERE. ALLOW ME TO PROVIDE A VISUAL EXAMPLE, MISS FIRIEL.
SAY, PERHAPS...
...THAT THE QUEENDOM OF GRAAL IS MUCH LIKE THIS BOWL OF SALAD.

...IS HERESY--
THE RESTRICTION OF DANGEROUS KNOWLEDGE FROM THE MASSES.
IT IS A SMALL, FRAGILE VESSEL HELD TOGETHER BY TWO THINGS. ONE IS THE WALL, WHICH SEPARATES HUMANITY FROM THE DRAGONS.
THE SECOND...
WHEN THOSE TWO THINGS FAIL, WELL...
CRASH
MY APOLOGIES, GOOD MADAM. PLEASE ALLOW ME TO CLEAN UP THE PIECES.
SIR! WE HAVEN'T ALL THE CROCKERY IN THE WORLD, YOU KNOW!

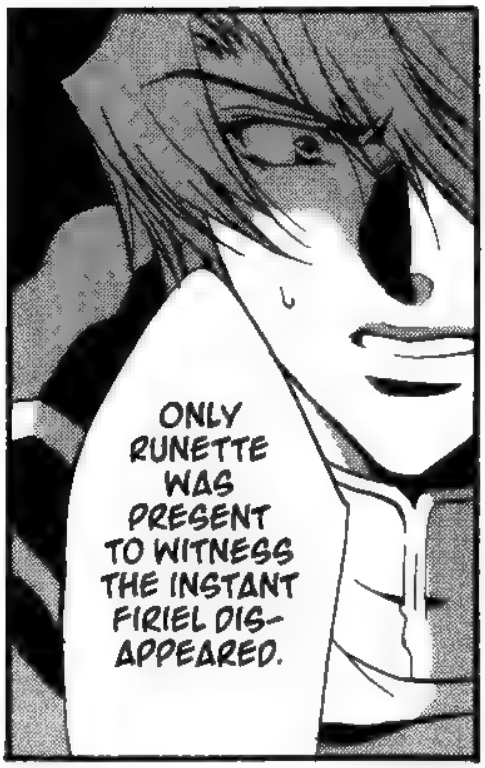
THE FIRST STAR QUEEN ASTRAEA WAS A WOMAN NAMED ANN.
QUEEN ANN HAD BUT ONE WISH FOR THIS PLANET.
SHE DESIRED FOR ALL HUMANITY TO LIVE PEACE-FULLY...
...WITHOUT INFRINGING UNDULY UPON THE HABITATS OF THIS PLANET'S NATIVE SPECIES.
A PARADISE WHERE PLANET AND PEOPLE LIVED IN HARMONY, PROTECTED BY THE GENTLE HANDS OF A WOMAN...
THAT WAS HER IDEAL.

IT WAS FOR THE SAKE OF THAT IDEAL THAT BOTH THE WALL AND THE NOTION OF HERESY WERE CONCEIVED.
...THE VESSEL THAT CONTAINS HER DREAM IS BRITTLE AND ON THE VERGE OF BREAKING.
...900 YEARS AFTER THE PASSING OF QUEEN ANN...
HOWEVER, NOW...
EVERY-THING THAT PROTECTED GRAAL IS FAILING.
BRIGION'S INDEPENDENTLY ADVANCED MILITARY TECHNOLOGY AND THEIR APPETITE FOR EXPANSION, THE AGING WALL'S GROWING FRAGILITY...
...QUEEN ANN'S PARADISE IS TEETERING ON THE EDGE OF TOTAL DESTRUCTION.
RIGHT NOW, AT THIS VERY MOMENT...
OF COURSE, ALL OF THIS WAS FORESEEN 900 YEARS AGO.

AND THERE IS NOTHING THAT CAN BE DONE TO STOP IT.
NOTHING, FOR EDEN IS ALWAYS FATED TO COME TO AN END BY THE WILES OF THE SERPENT AND THE FORBIDDEN FRUIT HE OFFERS.

Chapter 28: The Shadow Kingdom

I-I DO NOT KNOW, MY LORD.
HOW?! WHERE?! WHAT HAPPENED?!
I HAVEN'T EVEN THE SLIGHTEST IDEA HOW OR WHAT TO THINK OF THIS.

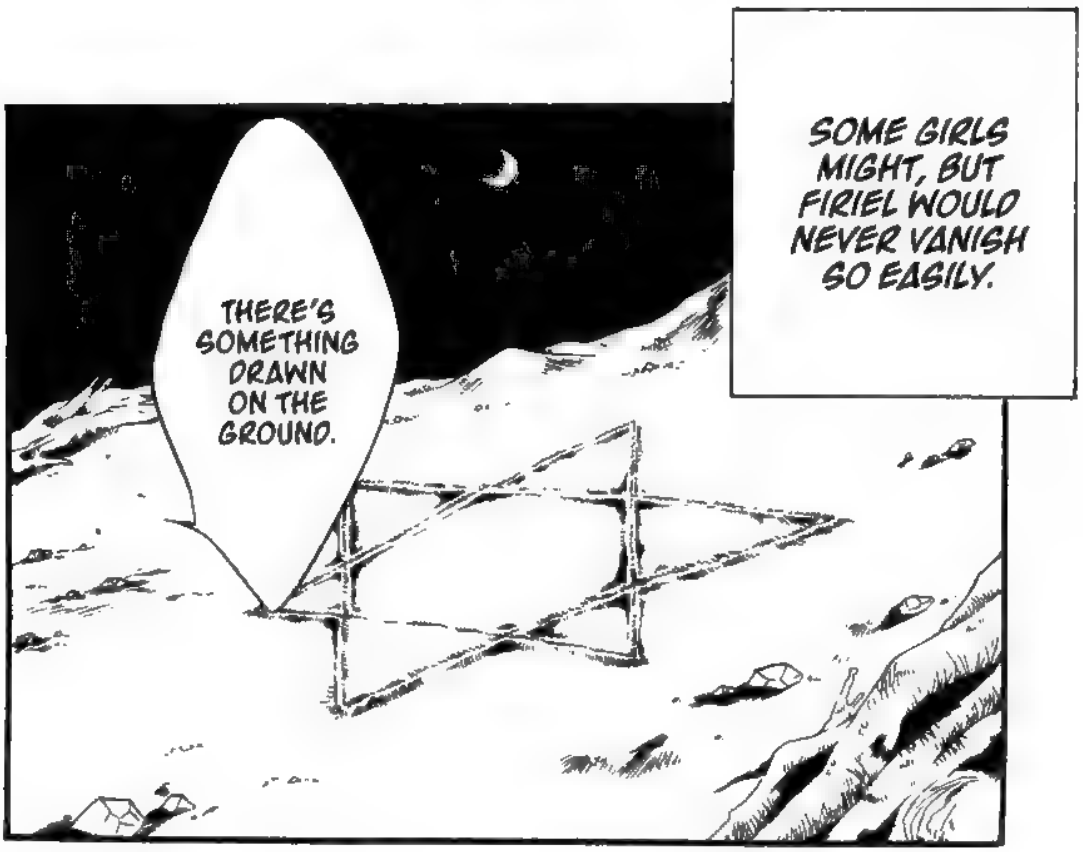

ONLY RUNETTE WAS PRESENT TO WITNESS THE INSTANT FIRIEL DIS-APPEARED.

WHAT?!
FIRIEL HAS VANISHED?!

ACCORDING TO HER-- AH...HIM, I MEAN...
...FIRIEL SOMEHOW MANAGED TO SLIP THROUGH AN INVISIBLE WALL, BECOMING TRAPPED ON THE FAR SIDE A HERD OF DRAGONS STAMPEDED TOWARDS HER...
...AND FIRIEL, PINNED BETWEEN THE DRAGONS AND THE WALL, APPEARED TO B-BE CRUSHED.
BUT RUNETTE CLAIMS THAT AFTER THE STAMPEDE PASSED THERE WAS NO SIGN OF FIRIEL--NEITHER ALIVE NOR DEAD-- ANYWHERE.
BUT... THAT'S ABSURD! UNBELIEV- ABLE!

...DIDN'T BEAR THE EXPRESSION OF A LIAR.
NO, HE LOOKED DRAINED OF ALL LIFE.
BUT RUNETTE'S FACE...
I ALSO THOUGHT IT AN UNBELIEVABLE STORY, MY LORD.
LORD EUSIS, WHERE COULD FIRIEL HAVE GONE?
COULD SHE TRULY BE...
...DEAD?!

NO!! SHE'S NOT DEAD! SHE IS ALIVE--I'M CERTAIN OF IT!
NOT FIRIEL...
SHE'S ALIVE, AND SHE WILL RETURN TO US AS SOON AS SHE IS ABLE.


THERE'S SOMETHING DRAWN ON THE GROUND.
SOME GIRLS MIGHT, BUT FIRIEL WOULD NEVER VANISH SO EASILY.

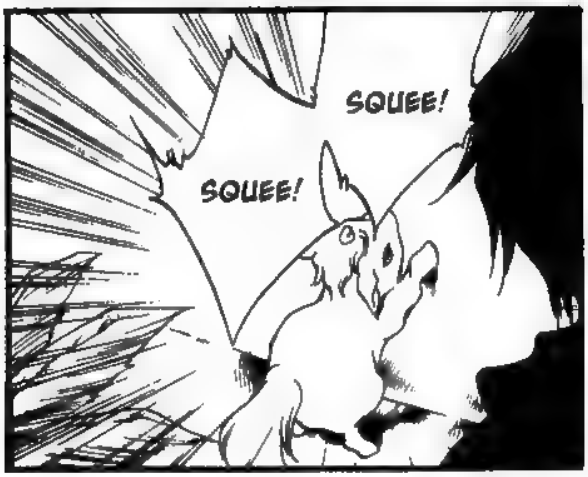
YES. THE GEOMETRIC FIGURE ITSELF HOLDS NO MEANING...
...BUT I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE EASIER FOR YOU IF A VISUAL CUE WAS PRESENT.

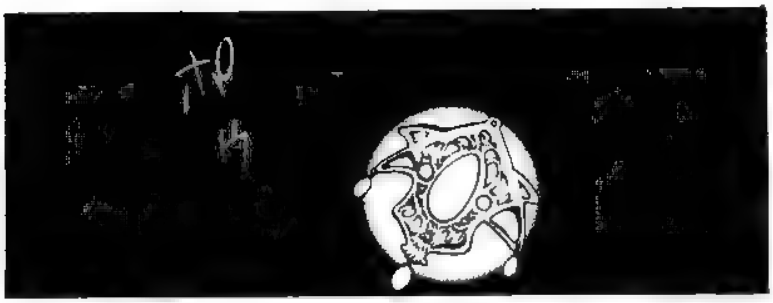
I HAVE OPENED A ROAD IN THE CENTER OF THE FIGURE. IT WILL LEAD TO WHENCE YOU CAME.
FARE THEE WELL, MISS FIRIEL. I DOUBT WE SHALL MEET AGAIN.
AND I SUGGEST TO YOU ONCE MORE-- FORGET THIS HAPPENED. IT'S FOR THE BEST.

I WON'T FORGET YOU, BARD.
TO EVERYONE ELSE, YOU MIGHT FADE AWAY LIKE LAST NIGHT'S DREAMS WHEN THEY WAKE UP IN THE MORNING...
...BUT I WON'T EVER FORGET YOU.

OH, AND THANK YOU! FOR LOTS OF THINGS!

SQUEEP
!!


SQUEE!
SQUEE!



Fl--

WHUMP

MMH...
RAIN...?

RUNE...?

I KNOW JUST HOW MUCH THE PROFESSOR REGRETTED NOT NOTICING EDILENE'S ILLNESS SOONER. HE ALWAYS BLAMED HIMSELF FOR HER DEATH.
I'M A RESEARCHER TO THE BONE. MY WORK IS MY LIFE.
IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO MAKE A WOMAN HAPPY.
FIRIEL, WHY DO YOU ALWAYS, ALWAYS HAVE TO BE LIKE THIS?!
WHY MUST YOU ALWAYS PUT YOURSELF IN SUCH DANGER...?
I DON'T BELONG BY YOUR SIDE BY ANY STRETCH OF THE IMAGINATION, BUT...
THE SAME THING COULD HAPPEN WITH US. I'M NOT WORTHY OF BEING WITH YOU.
...WITH YOU DIVING HEAD-FIRST INTO DANGEROUS SITUATION AFTER DANGEROUS SITUATION...
RUNE...

...HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO TAKE MY EYES OFF YOU?
RUNE...!

DO YOU FEEL BETTER NOW?
YOU SEARCHED FOR ME THE WHOLE THREE DAYS I WAS GONE, DIDN'T YOU? THANKS.
GOODNESS, YOU'RE COVERED WITH SCRAPES.
RUNE...? COULD I ASK YOU A FAVOR?
WOULD YOU MIND RESEARCHING ME?

...IS SOMEHOW CONNECTED TO THIS KINSHIP STONE AND THE ROYAL BLOOD I BEAR.
...ALL OF IT...
EVERY-THING I JUST TOLD YOU ABOUT...
...ALL THE STUFF THAT'S HAPPENED IN THESE LAST THREE DAYS...
I CAN'T HELP BUT WONDER...
...JUST WHAT IT IS THAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT THE STAR QUEEN'S "ROYAL BLOODLINE."
...THE "ROAD" THAT THE BARD MADE...
...ME SLIPPING THROUGH A WALL NO ONE SHOULD BE ABLE TO PASS...
I MEAN, THE BARD SAID IT, RIGHT?
THE VESSEL THAT'S PROTECTING GRAAL IS OLD AND IS GETTING READY TO BREAK. WHEN IT FINALLY DOES ALL FALL APART, THE WORLD WILL END.
BUT WHAT HAPPENS THEN? THE STAR QUEEN MUST KNOW THIS BECAUSE THE BARD TOLD HER, SO WHY ISN'T SHE DOING ANYTHING?

I MAY NOT BE A QUEEN-IN-WAITING...
...BUT I STILL WANT TO PROTECT THE COUNTRY I LIVE IN.

THE FATE OF ALL GRAAL ISN'T SOMETHING THAT SHOULD BE DECIDED ONLY BY ASTRAEA.
THAT JUST ISN'T FAIR.
IT SHOULD BE DECIDED BY EVERYONE WHO LIVES THERE.

PLEASE, RUNE!
HELP ME!
YOU WON'T REGRET DOING THIS, RIGHT?
YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT COMING WITH ME MEANS.
YOU WILL BE BRANDED A HERETIC, TOO.
YOU WON'T EVER BE ABLE TO GO BACK TO THE PALACE, OR ANY OTHER PLACE THE LIGHT SHINES EVER AGAIN.
WILL THAT BE ALL RIGHT?

YOU WON'T HAVE ANY REGRETS, WILL YOU?
NO...
NOT WITH YOU BY MY SIDE.
...NEVER.

くぅ…
WHΔ…?
YEEP!
R-
RUNE?!

gurgle
SORRY... HAVEN'T EATEN... THREE DAYS...
?
I'M SURE HE'S AROUND SOMEWHERE NEARBY.
COME ON OUT, KAIN.
STARS ABOVE, DO YOU EVER CHANGE? I DON'T HAVE ANY FOOD ON ME!
NO, IT'S ALL RIGHT.
WAIT HERE WHILE I FIND SOME BERRIES OR--

FIRIEL...
THIS IS KAIN ABEL.
HE'S PART OF THE CIRCLE OF HERMES. AMONG OTHER THINGS, HE'S TAKEN IT UPON HIMSELF TO WATCH OVER ME.
PLEASED TO MEET YOU...
... DAUGHTER OF PROFESSOR DEE.

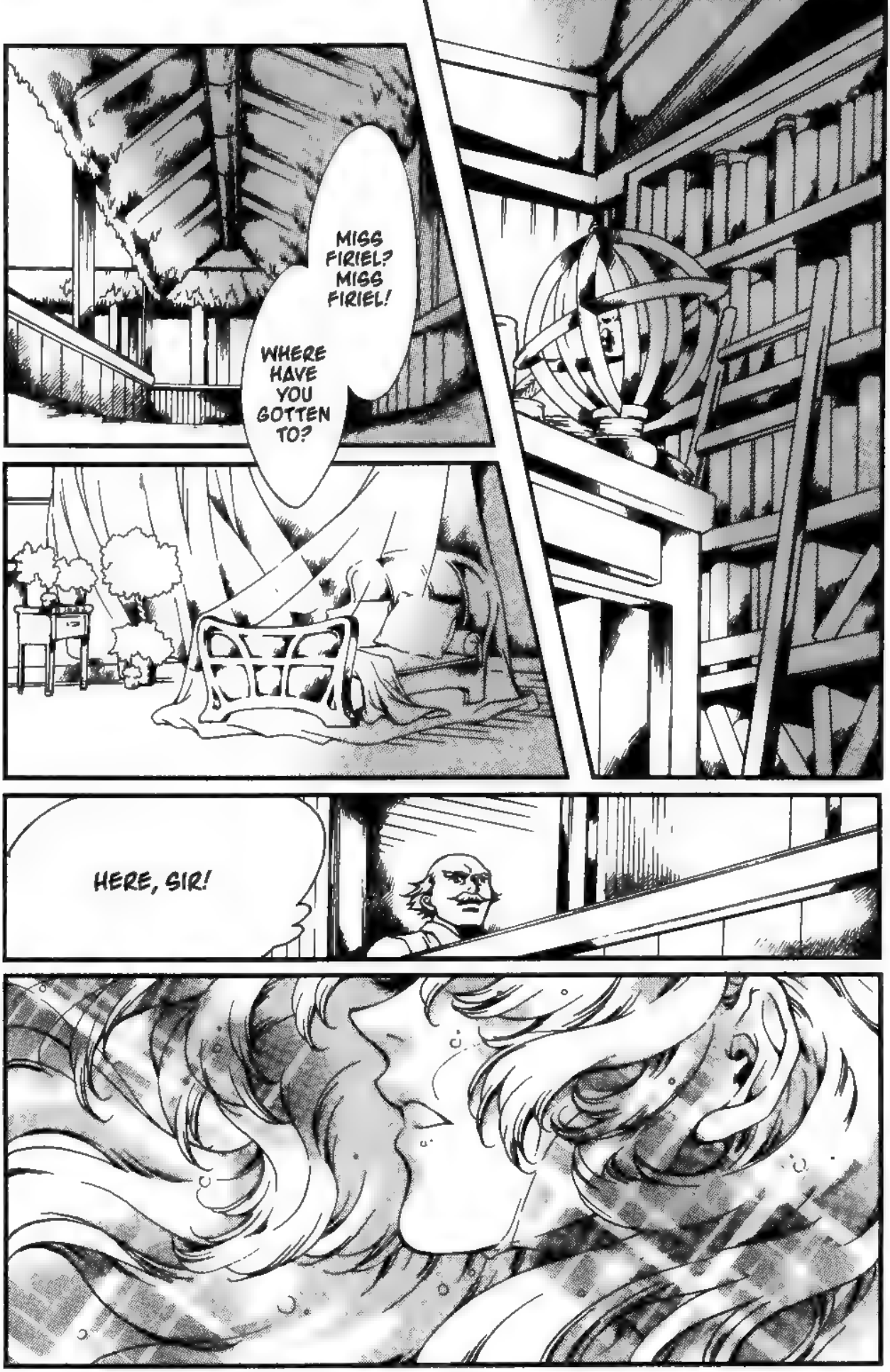
A MEMBER OF THE CIRCLE...!
HERE, SIR.
THE MEDICINE.
キュッ
SHEESH. I'VE NOT MET ANYONE ELSE SO TERRIBLY IN NEED OF BEING WATCHED OVER AS YOU.
OH...BE QUIET.
MOST RESEARCHERS HAVE AN UNFORTUNATE TENDENCY TO FORGET THINGS LIKE FOOD AND REST, BUT YOU TAKE THAT TO NEW LENGTHS.
DRINK SLOWLY...
UM... THANK YOU, MR. KAIN.

NO.
BUT I KNOW A LITTLE ABOUT A LOT OF THINGS.
AND RUNE IS A SPECIAL CASE.
AS I AM SURE YOU ARE AWARE, HE IS AN INCREDIBLY INTELLIGENT YOUNG MAN. MANY IN THE CIRCLE HAVE VERY HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR HIS TALENTS.
ARE YOU A DOCTOR?
SIR KAIN'S MEDICINE ALWAYS WORKS WONDERS. RUNE WILL BE BACK TO HIS USUAL SELF SOON.
EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE, DAUGHTER OF PROFESSOR DEE.
THE HERMES TRISMEGISTUS WHOM I SERVE, THE TRISMEGISTUS OF RESEARCH, HAS PERSONALLY REQUESTED I SEE TO RUNE'S WELL-BEING.
DON'T ASK ME HOW...
...BUT THIS "KAIN" PERSON REMINDS ME AN AWFUL LOT OF THE BARD.
UM, MR. KAIN?

I WANT TO HELP RUNE!
I WANT TO WORK WITH HIM TO FIND THE ANSWERS TO OUR WORLD'S MYSTERIES!
I WANT TO BECOME A MEMBER OF THE STAFF OF THE SERPENT, TOO!
PLEASE, SIR!

YOU... YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS, FIRIEL.
YOU'RE A CHILD OF ASTRAEA'S ROYAL LINE...!
SO? WHAT DOES THAT REALLY MATTER, IN THE END?
LET'S TAKE HER WITH US, KAIN.
THOUGH ASTRAEA'S LIGHT NEVER REACHES OUR SHADOW KINGDOM...
THOUGH THAT BARD FIRIEL MENTIONED MAY HAVE SAID THAT IT WILL BE HERESY'S SHADOW THAT ULTIMATELY DESTROYS OUR WORLD...
...I HIGHLY DOUBT ANYTHING WITHIN IT COULD EVER SCARE FIRIEL.

...THIS SHADOW IS NOW FIRMLY BOUND TO THIS LIGHT.
WE WILL NEVER BE SEPARATED AGAIN.
LET'S GO, RUNE-- TOGETHER!


MISS FIRIEL? MISS FIRIEL!
WHERE HAVE YOU GOTTEN TO?
HERE, SIR!

GOOD MORNING, PROFESSOR VAN JONES!

Chapter 29: The Left Hand of Darkness

SEEIN' HER LIKE THAT, YOU'D NEVER GUESS SHE'S A PRINCESS OF THE BLOOD!
Wa Ha Ha
PROFESSOR VAN JONES IS ONE OF THE THREE "HERMES TRISMEGISTI," WHO ARE THE LEADERS OF THE WHOLE STAFF OF THE SERPENT ORGANIZATION.
HE'S THE TRISMEGISTUS FOR THE RESEARCH BRANCH.
OH, REALLY?
I ALWAYS THOUGHT THE HERMES TRISMEGISTI WERE SUPPOSED TO BE SCARY, ANCIENT OLD MEN--WITHERED AND WRINKLED, WITH WARTS ON THEIR NOSES AND STUFF.
WELL, I COULD SAY THE SAME FOR YOU, SIR!
WA HA HA HA !!
BUT HIS IS THE TRUE FACE OF THE CIRCLE OF HERMES.

TO THE REST OF GRAAL, THE CIRCLE IS THE NAME FOR A BAND OF CRIMINALS WHO HAVE TURNED THEIR BACKS ON THE HOLY LIGHT OF THE STAR QUEEN ASTRAEA.
THEY DABBLE IN KNOWLEDGE FORBIDDEN BY THE STAR QUEEN, STAINING THEIR HANDS WITH HERETICAL RESEARCH.
SHOULD THEY EVER BE FOUND AND CAUGHT, THEY WOULD BE TURNED OVER TO THE INQUISITION FOR TRIAL...
...FOLLOWED BY EXECUTION AT THE HAND OF THE GODDESS AND THE LIGHTNING SHE CALLS DOWN UPON THEM FROM THE MIDDAY STAR.

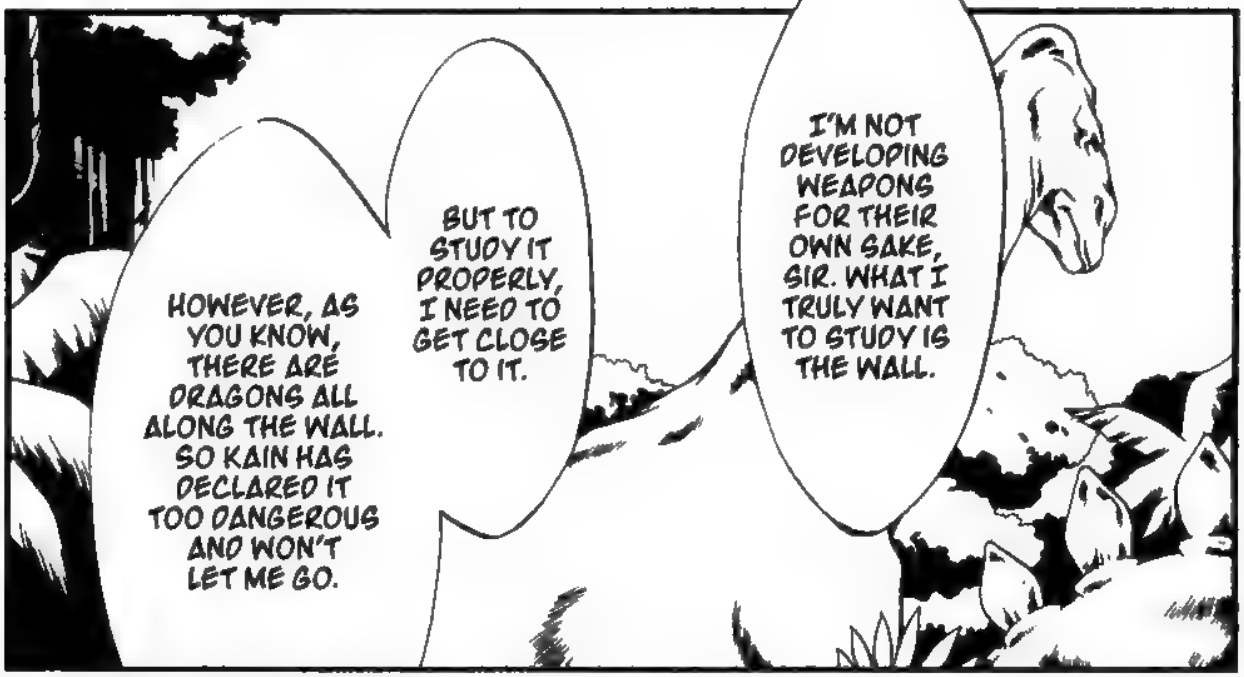
YES, THAT CERTAINLY SOUNDS RATHER FRIGHTENING!
Ha ha ha!
ACROSS THAT LONG, LONG HISTORY, WE'VE CHANGED...
...EVENTUALLY SPLITTING INTO THE THREE BRANCHES OF TODAY, WITH A TRISMEGISTUS TO LEAD EACH.
WE'VE EVEN LET DARKER MEMBERS, SUCH AS THE LATE DUKE REIZ, INTO THE CIRCLE.
WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW IS THAT THE CIRCLE WAS BORN AT THE SAME TIME AS GRAAL, 900 YEARS AGO.
THE WORLD'S OPINION OF US DOES SEEM PLAUSIBLE, DESPITE ITS ULTIMATE FALLACY.
WHEN LIGHTNING STRIKES ONE OF THE STAFF OF THE SERPENT OUT OF A CLEAR, BLUE SKY AND HE COMES AWAY WITH A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PERSONALITY AND SET OF VIEWS...
...THE WORLD SEES IT AS JUSTICE DONE TO AN UGLY EVIL.
IN THE END...
SOME MAY THINK HIM THE FACE OF US...
...BUT IN REALITY, WE'RE NO MORE THAN COMMON PEOPLE WITH A COMMON PASSION--A DESIRE FOR THE TRUTH.

...WE ARE, ALL OF US, MUCH LIKE THAT BOYFRIEND OF YOURS AT HEART.
OH, PROFESSOR! DON'T SAY THAT OUT LOUD! TEE HEE HEE HEE!
OH, SPEAKING OF RUNE, HAVE YOU SEEN HIM? HE HASN'T BEEN IN HIS ROOM SINCE YESTERDAY.
HE'S IN SMITH-SONIAN'S LAB.
THE TWO OF THEM HAVE BEEN TINKERING WITH SOME EXPERIMENT OR ANOTHER...
MY BOYFRIEND. RUNE'S MY BOYFRIEND NOW.

YUP. LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE AT IT AGAIN.
Yikes!
RUNE?!
DAM-MIT...!
カリ!

SMITH-SONIAN, YOU MORON!
I WARNED YOU TO BE MORE CAREFUL WITH THE RATIOS IN THAT COMPOUND!
OW!!
WHAT, BY ALL THE STARS, WERE YOU ATTEMPTING TO MAKE, BOY?!
WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE STARS DID YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING, BLOWING THE WHOLE ROOM UP?!
C'MON, SMITHSONIAN'S ROOM GETS BLOWN UP AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH.
HE IS ABSOLUTELY OBSESSED WITH FIRE POWDER.

PORTABLE EXPLOSIVES. PREFERABLY NO BIGGER THAN A MAN'S FIST OR TWO IN SIZE.
DEVELOPING DEVICES OF DESTRUCTION IS THE TOP OF A VERY SLIPPERY SLOPE, YOUNG MAN. IT CAN LEAD TO A QUICK FALL INTO DARK ARTS IF YOU ARE NOT CAREFUL.
...BUT THERE ARE STILL LINES THAT EVEN WE MUST NOT CROSS.
HAVING BROKEN SOCIETY'S LAWS, WE MUST RELY MORE FIRMLY ON OUR OWN CONVICTIONS TO DETERMINE WHAT TO DO FOR THE GOOD AND BENEFIT OF ALL MANKIND.
RUNE, LET ME EXPLAIN SOME-THING TO YOU.
YES, ALL OF US HERE HAVE WILLINGLY TURNED AWAY FROM THE LAWS AS THE GODDESS HAS WRITTEN THEM...


I'M NOT DEVELOPING WEAPONS FOR THEIR OWN SAKE, SIR. WHAT I TRULY WANT TO STUDY IS THE WALL.
BUT TO STUDY IT PROPERLY, I NEED TO GET CLOSE TO IT.
HOWEVER, AS YOU KNOW, THERE ARE DRAGONS ALL ALONG THE WALL. SO KAIN HAS DECLARED IT TOO DANGEROUS AND WON'T LET ME GO.

BUT IF I HAD WEAPONS LIKE THESE HAND-BOMBS, I COULD DRIVE THE DRAGONS OFF.

I NEED TO KNOW, SIR. I NEED TO FIND OUT WHAT IT IS PROFESSOR DEE WAS TRYING TO DISCOVER, WHAT THAT WALL REALLY IS, AND WHAT IT MEANS TO THIS WORLD.
THEN I COULD GET TO WORK.

BUT THAT'S NOT YOUR ONLY REASON, RIGHT, RUNE?
I STILL HAVEN'T HELD UP MY END OF THE DEAL I MADE WITH EUGIS.
IN EXCHANGE FOR LETTING ME GO, I'LL GIVE HIM WHATEVER INFORMATION I CAN ABOUT THE WALL.
THAT WAS THE BARGAIN WE MADE BACK AT THE CAMP IN KAGWELL.
I HAVE YET TO SEND HIM ANY OF THE INFORMATION I PROMISED.

EUSIS...
IT'S BEEN THREE MONTHS SINCE YOUR MISHAP.
THE HOLE WE FOUND IN THE WALL COULD VERY LIKELY HAVE GOTTEN BIGGER, LETTING MORE DRAGONS THROUGH.
I HAVEN'T KEPT MY PROMISE TO ADALE YET, EITHER.
AND THAT WOULD MEAN EUSIS' JOB, SAVING KAGWELL FROM THE DRAGONS, IS GETTING HARDER.
DO THEY THINK...
...I DIED WHEN I VANISHED INTO THE WALL?
"DON'T WORRY!"
"I'LL PROTECT EUSIS!"

SO MANY PEOPLE LOVE YOU...
...BUT I'VE BEEN ABLE TO KEEP YOU ALL TO MYSELF FOR MONTHS NOW.
I...OWE THEM FOR THAT.

YOU KNOW, RUNE, YOU'VE CHANGED SINCE YOU CAME HERE.
YOU THINK SO?
HE GOES OUT AND ABOUT ON HIS OWN, AND OFTEN TALKS WITH THE OTHER RESEARCHERS.
OH, YOU HAVE. BEFORE, YOU WOULD HAVE DISMISSED EUSIS' FEELINGS BECAUSE HE'S NOBILITY.
I REALLY LIKE THIS NEW YOU. A LOT. ♡
FOR RUNE...
...GETTING TAKEN IN BY THE STAFF OF THE SERPENT WAS A VERY, VERY GOOD THING.

...JUST THE TWO OF US.
LET'S GO SEE THE WALL AGAIN, RUNE...
I DON'T EVER WANT TO BE SEPARATED FROM YOU AGAIN.
I WANT US TO BE TOGETHER FOREVER.
YEAH...
WHAM

HMM. YOUR LITTLE UNICORN UTTERLY DESPISES ME FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON.
LITTLE MASTER RUU!
RUU, STOP IT!! DOWN!!
WHY MUST YOU ALWAYS BE SO MEAN TO RUNE, LITTLE MASTER RUU, HMM?
AND HE'S USUALLY SUCH A GOOD LITTLE BOY.

バチバチ
バチ
?
?
?

YES, RUNE HAS CERTAINLY SOFTENED DURING HIS TIME HERE.
WHEN HE FIRST ARRIVED...
...HE WAS AN UTTER TRIAL ON EVERYONE'S NERVES. RARELY EATING, RARELY SLEEPING, ALWAYS KEEPING TO HIMSELF...
...BUT WITH YOU HERE, FIRIEL, HE SEEMS TO HAVE TAKEN A DEFINITE TURN FOR THE BETTER.

WHEN WE FINALLY FOUND HIM, SHORTLY AFTER HE HAD KILLED DUKE RIEZ...
...HE WAS LITTLE MORE THAN AN EMPTY SHELL.
WE HAD BEEN LOOKING FOR HIM FOR A LONG, LONG TIME, YOU KNOW.
PROFESSOR DEE, YOUR FATHER, WAS WELL KNOWN TO US. WE ALL REVERED HIM AS AN EXTRA-ORDINARILY TALENTED RESEARCHER.
MANY WERE THE VOICES THAT CLAMORED TO PUT HIM IN THE SEAT OF A TRISMEGISTUS.
RUNE, AT HIS TENDER YOUNG AGE, SEEMS TO HAVE FULLY INHERITED NOT ONLY DEE'S RESEARCH, BUT HIS TALENT AND PASSION AS WELL.
HE IS, IN OTHER WORDS, AN ELITE AMONG THE ELITE.

IN THE FUTURE...
...MANY OF US SEE HIM BECOMING AN IMPORTANT PLAYER IN THE LONG HISTORY OF OUR SHADOW KINGDOM...
...AS ONE OF THE NEXT HERMES TRISMEGISTI.
A FUTURE TRISMEGISTUS...? THEN, THAT MAKES HIM A PRINCE OF THE SHADOW KINGDOM...!

PLEASE, SIR!!
LET BOTH OF US GO STUDY THE WALL!
C'MON, RUNE! YOU ASK, TOO! NICELY!
HMM? OH.
SURE. HAVE A SAFE TRIP.
HUH? IT'S THAT EASY?
YES, IT IS THAT EASY.
CERTAINLY YOU WON'T SOLVE THE MYSTERIES SURROUNDING THE WALL, UNICORNS AND YOUR QUEEN'S KINSHIP STONE IN A SINGLE DAY, OR EVEN A SINGLE MONTH.
HOWEVER, JUST BECAUSE THIS PROBLEM MAY TAKE A LONG TIME TO SOLVE DOES NOT MEAN WE SHOULD DO NOTHING. THE ANSWERS WON'T FIND THEMSELVES, AFTER ALL.

THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF THE STAFF OF THE SERPENT...
...IS TO PROTECT AND NURTURE THE SINCERE PASSION FOR KNOWLEDGE.
IT DOES NOT MATTER HOW OFTEN THAT PASSION IS OPPRESSED OR THWARTED...
...IT CAN NEVER BE COMPLETELY BEATEN OUT OF MANKIND.
THE LONG, CONTINUOUS HISTORY OF THE CIRCLE IS PROOF OF THAT.
SO FAR BE IT FROM ME TO GET IN THE WAY OF YOURS.
GO, WITH MY BLESSING.
THANK YOU SO MUCH, SIR!!

KAIN.
I JUST RECEIVED THIS FROM THE TRISMEGISTUS OF INTELLI-GENCE.
Be careful out there!
WELL! IT SEEMS THE KINGDOM OF KAGWELL IS BECOMING MORE AND MORE UNSTABLE BY THE DAY. THERE IS EVEN WORD OF DISTURBANCE WITHIN THE ROYAL COURT ITSELF.
WE WILL HAVE TO MOVE TO A MORE SECLUDED SPOT.
IF KAGWELL FALLS, WE ARE NO LONGER SAFE HERE.
GIVEN THE WAY THINGS SEEM TO BE GOING, THIS MAY WELL BE THEIR LAST CHANCE.
IT SEEMS THAT LETTING THE CHILDREN GO TO THE WALL NOW WAS PRUDENT, AFTER ALL.
SEE YOU LATER, EVERY-ONE!

WHAT? YOU'RE BRINGING THAT LITTLE FOUR-LEGGED NUISANCE WITH US, TOO?
OF COURSE!

Chapter 30: What the Pawn Has to Say

HOLY STARS, THIS PLACE IS A MESS! WHATEVER PLANTS HAVEN'T BEEN EATEN HAVE ALL BEEN TRAMPLED TO BITS.
AND THERE ARE WAY MORE DOWNED TREES THAN LAST TIME WE WERE HERE.
THIS PROVES IT, THEN. THE HOLE IN THE WALL IS GROWING LARGER.

WHICH, IN TURN, MEANS THAT EUGIS AND THE OTHER DRAGON KNIGHTS ARE PROBABLY STILL STUCK IN KAGWELL FIGHTING THEM OFF.
THAT MEANS MORE DRAGONS COMING THROUGH TO OUR SIDE.
ADALE...

WE NEED TO CONCENTRATE ON DOING THINGS WE CAN DO INSTEAD OF WORRYING ABOUT WHAT WE CAN'T.
RUNE, LET'S HURRY TO THE WALL, OKAY?
LET'S.
WHAT'S THIS...?

BUT THIS CAN'T BE GOOD. THEY'RE EVEN STARTING TO BREED ON OUR SIDE OF THE WALL!
DRAGON EGGS...?! AND A CHICK!
I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE THIS BEFORE!

FIRIEL ...?
IN SCHOOL I WAS TAUGHT...
...THAT ALL DRAGONS WERE EVIL CREATURES.
WE WERE TAUGHT TO REVERE THE DRAGON KNIGHTS.
THE TEACHER SAID THEY BROUGHT NOTHING BUT DESTRUCTION.

I'VE SEEN REAL LIVE DRAGONS NOW.
BUT...
...I'M NOT SO SURE THAT'S TRUE ANYMORE.
SURE, THEY'RE TROUBLE-SOME, BUT THEY'RE NOT EVIL.
THEY'RE JUST TRYING TO LIVE AS BEST THEY CAN, JUST LIKE US.
RUNE...
IF THE WALL REALLY DOES VANISH COMPLETELY SOMEDAY, THEN WHAT WILL--

HEH. KILLING THE GRASS-EATING ONES IS SO EASY.
THE MAIN TROOPS WILL BE HERE IN A COUPLE OF DAYS.
YOU THINK WE SHOULD KILL ANOTHER TWO OR THREE, JUST IN CASE?
NAH. THERE'S PLENTY HERE AND WE WON'T WANT FOR MEAT.
DID YOU SEE THEIR WEAPONS?!
HOW COULD THEY KILL A HUGE DRAGON WITH JUST THAT LITTLE TUBE?
WHO ARE THEY...?!
BRIGION SOLDIERS...?! HERE...?!
IMPOS-SIBLE!
IT TAKES CARAVANS TWO FULL MONTHS TO CROSS THE DESERT BETWEEN BRIGION AND HERE!! THE BRIGION ARMY COULDN'T POSSIBLY SNEAK ACROSS THAT LENGTH!

OH HO! THIS ONE LOOKS REAL NICE!
WELL, LOOK HERE A COUPLE OF SUSPICIOUS-LOOKING BRATS GRAB THEM!
GET YOUR HANDS OFF FIRIEL!!

DAMMIT!! THERE ARE TOO MANY OF THEM!
I COULD TAKE DOWN ONE OR TWO, BUT IN THAT TIME THEY COULD SERIOUSLY HURT FIRIEL!
RUNE ...!
"I W-I-L-L" ...
..."C-O-M-E"...
..."S-A-V-E Y-O-U"...

MMPH ?
GET IN THERE!

UGH, WHAT A COMMO-TION.
WHAT'S GOING ON?
OH, GOODESS! GIRLS, YOU WON'T BELIEVE THIS!
THAT RED HAIR...! IT'S THAT LITTLE TRAMP FIRIEL!
WHAT IN THE GOODESS' NAME ARE YOU DOING HERE?!
ME?! WHAT ABOUT YOU?!
HOW DID THE TAURUS ACADEMY STUDENT COUNCIL WIND UP ALL THE WAY OUT HERE?!

YEAH, YEAH. BUT DO WE REALLY GOTTA KILL HIM RIGHT AWAY? I MEAN, HE'S KINDA PRETTY IF YOU LOOK AT HIM RIGHT.
ARE WE REALLY GOING TO KILL HIM?
WELL, YEAH. ORDERS ARE ORDERS, MAN.

THIS IS FAR ENOUGH.

YOU KNOW THE GIRL THAT CAME WITH THIS KID AND THE HOT WOMEN WE CAPTURED THIS MORNING ARE ALL GOING TO WIND UP TAKEN BY THE CAPTAINS, RIGHT?
I DON'T! I DON'T! IT'S JUST, WELL...
HE'S WHA--?! DAMN, I DIDN'T KNOW YOU SWUNG THAT WAY!

MAYBE WE SHOULDN'T KILL HIM RIGHT OFF.

HMM. GOOD POINT, MAN.

COMMON GRUNTS LIKE US NEVER HAVE A SHOT.

HOLD STILL!
HEH HEH HEH ...

RUNE ...
...YOU MUSTN'T.
GAH!
UGK!

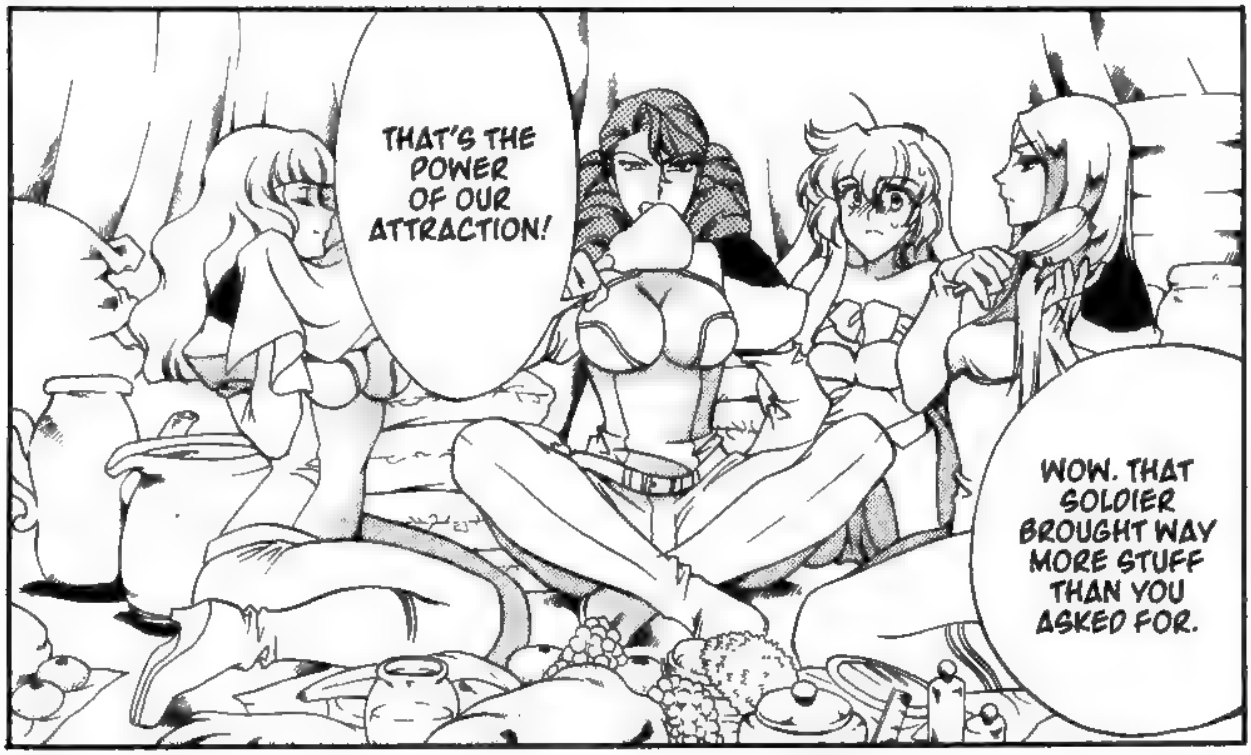
SO YOU STILL HAD ONE OF THE POISONED NEEDLES CHEVIAT GAVE YOU BEFORE YOU LEFT THE PALACE.
YEAH. LEANDRA GAVE ME TWO.
ONE TO USE ON THE DUKE...
...AND ONE TO USE ON MYSELF, SHOULD I BE CAPTURED.

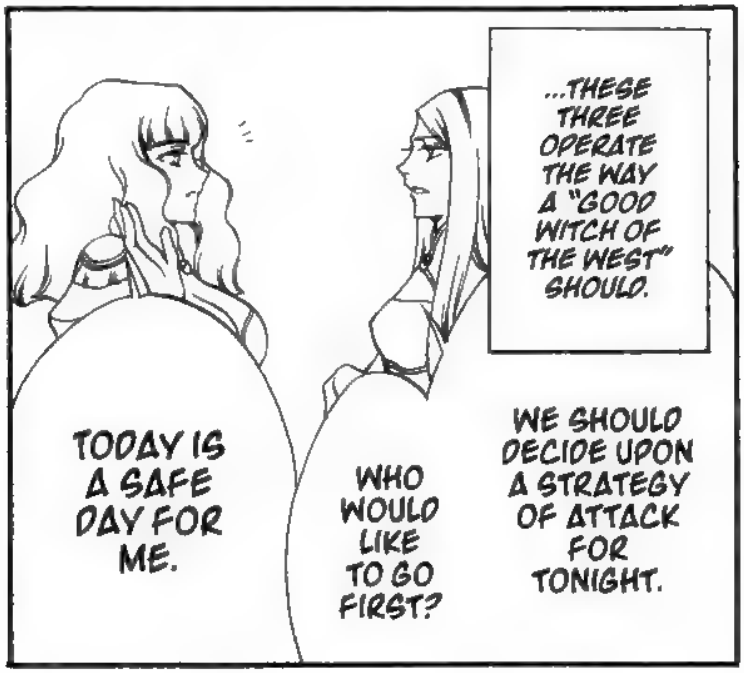
WHY DON'T I HOLD ON TO IT FOR NOW?
IT IS MOST CERTAINLY NOT AN APPROPRIATE WEAPON FOR A FUTURE TRISMEGISTUS.
WHY? IT'S AN APPROPRIATE WEAPON FOR ME--INSIDIOUS AND LETHAL.
HOW CAN YOU BE SURE? I'VE HANDLED MURDER WEAPONS SINCE I WAS A CHILD...
I'M SO ACCUSTOMED TO THEIR USE THAT I SOMETIMES CAN'T HELP BUT WONDER IF KILLING MIGHT NOT BE MY TRUE CALLING AFTER ALL.
THEN IT IS EVEN MORE IMPERATIVE THAT YOU KEEP YOUR HANDS CLEAN OF THEM.
I SAY THIS NOT ONLY FOR YOUR SAKE, BUT FOR THAT OF FIRIEL AS WELL.
SHE LOVES AND TRUSTS YOU MORE THAN ANY OTHER. WHAT YOU MUST DO ABOVE ALL ELSE IS TO BECOME A FIT PARTNER FOR HER.

THAT ALONE WILL DO MUCH TO PROTECT HER.
HMPH! STRANGE WORDS TO HEAR FROM AN ASSASSIN.
HMPH!
BE THAT AS IT MAY, I SUGGEST WE HURRY.
THERE IS A PRINCESS TO SAVE, AFTER ALL.
YEAH, LET'S GO.

THEY COULDN'T BE!
BRIGION SOLDIERS?! ARE YOU MAD?
COULD THEY...? I MEAN, IF THIS ARMY TRULY IS FROM BRIGION, THEN WE MAY BE IN THE MIDDLE OF A MORE SERIOUS SITUATION THAN WE THOUGHT.
VERY TRUE.
IT WAS OUR FAILURE AT THE ACADEMY THAT GOT US SENT OUT TO THIS BACKWATER IN DISGRACE.
HOWEVER, WE MAY HAVE JUST BEEN HANDED THE PERFECT CHANCE FOR REDEMPTION. IF WE CAN BRING LADY LEANDRA VITAL INFORMATION ABOUT THIS ARMY, SHE WILL CERTAINLY BE PLEASED!
YEAH!!!
ALL RIGHT, GIRLS. WE START TONIGHT!
WHA? HUH? PREPARE? HOW? WITH WHAT?
WELL THEN, WE MUST MAKE HASTE AND PREPARE!

TONIGHT'S RATIONS.
OH, MR. SOLDIER...
VERY IMPORTANT PEOPLE ARE COMING TO SEE US TONIGHT, YES...?
YOU WOULDN'T WANT TO PRESENT US TO THEM ALL DUSTY AND DIRTY, WOULD YOU? THEY MIGHT BE... DISPLEASED...
IT'S SO HOT INSIDE THIS TENT.
I'M AFRAID WE'VE GOTTEN ALL SWEATY.
MIGHT WE BORROW A HAIRBRUSH? AND PERHAPS A SMALL MIRROR?
COULD WE HAVE SOME WATER, AS WELL?
OH, AND A CLEAN DRY WASHCLOTH!
UH, SURE ...
PLEASE, MR. SOLDIER? ♡


THAT'S THE POWER OF OUR ATTRACTION!
WOW. THAT SOLDIER BROUGHT WAY MORE STUFF THAN YOU ASKED FOR.


TODAY IS A SAFE DAY FOR ME.
WHO WOULD LIKE TO GO FIRST?
WE SHOULD DECIDE UPON A STRATEGY OF ATTACK FOR TONIGHT.
...THESE THREE OPERATE THE WAY A "GOOD WITCH OF THE WEST" SHOULD.

YOU KNOW, WHILE IT MAY BE A LITTLE WARPED...

EXCELLENT. LYTICIA, YOU WILL TAKE POINT TONIGHT.
HYLA, EVEN IF THEY SHOW INTEREST IN YOU, SEND THEM TOWARDS LYTICIA. UNDERSTOOD?
OF COURSE.
GOOD. LYTICIA, YOU ARE TO EXTRACT THIS INFORMATION WHILE IN HIS TENT: THE ARMY'S SIZE AND SCOPE, ITS WEAPONS, BOTH TYPE AND NUMBER...
...AS WELL AS THE PRESIDING GENERAL'S NAME AND HISTORY.
DISCOVERING THEIR PURPOSE HERE GOES WITHOUT SAYING.
"WHILE IN HIS TENT"?
GIRLS, LOOK! SHE'S BLUSHING!
HEH. DON'T WORRY.
I KNOW PRECISELY HOW USE-LESS YOU WILL BE TO US IN THIS, STUPID GIRL.
TEE HEE
UM...
IN FACT, I WOULD BE SHOCKED IF YOU KNEW EVEN THE FIRST THING ABOUT CONTRACEPTION!
HA HA HA HA HA

LO, WHAT A LOVELY SIGHT.
FOUR LADIES ALMOST AS RAVISHING AS FABLED BEAUTIES OF GRAAL.

NOW, I WOULD LIKE NOTHING MORE THAN TO ENTERTAIN ALL FOUR OF YOU TONIGHT...
...BUT, UNFORTUNATELY, I AM NOT AS YOUNG AS I ONCE WAS.
HMM...
I'LL TAKE THIS ONE.
WHA...?
COME HERE, GIRL!
HEY...!
NO!!

HEH HEH. I PREFER MY GIRLS TO BE... FRESH...
OH, NO. WE DIDN'T FORESEE THIS AT ALL.
NO! OUR ONE CHANCE AT REDEMP-TION!
LET GO!
LET GO!!
NO...!!
RU--
WHAT THE--?

YEOW!!
LITTLE MASTER RUU?
YAAAAA!!
SQUEE!

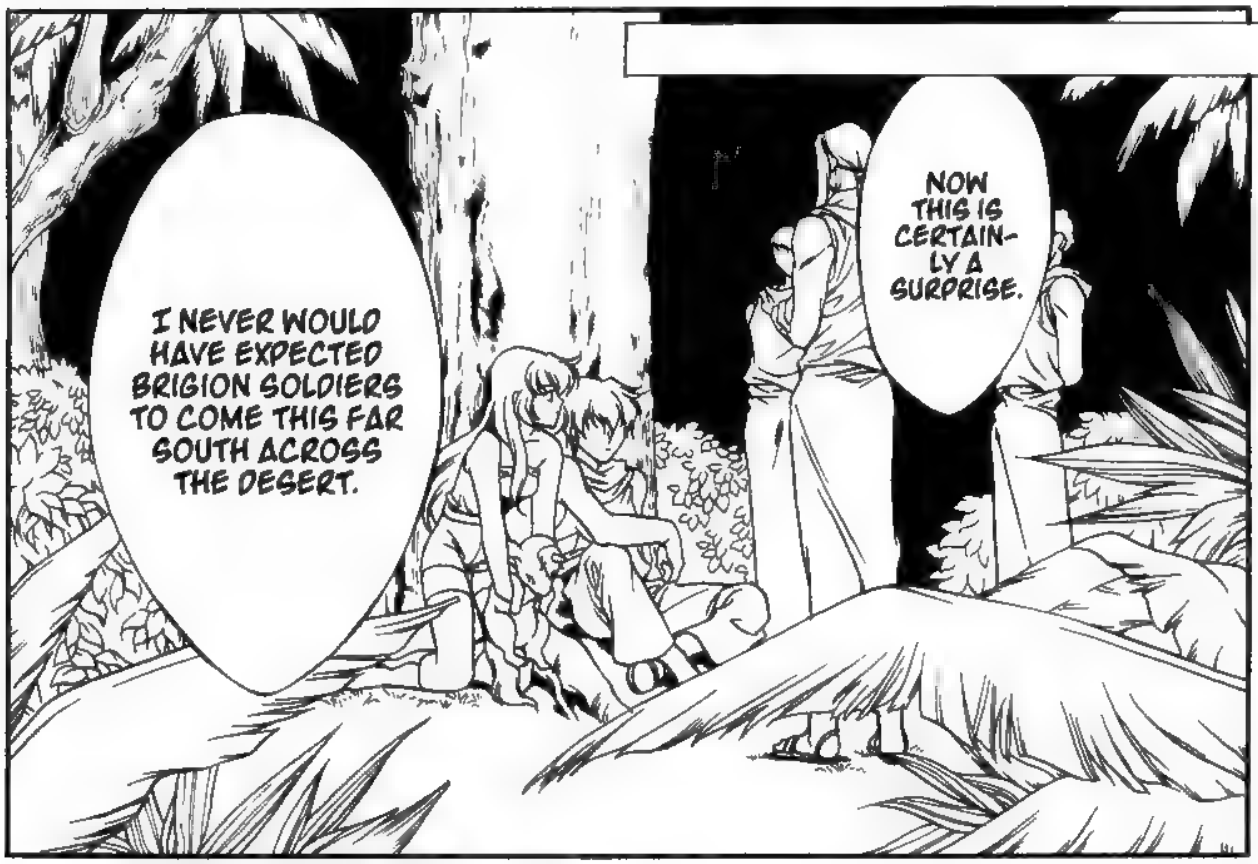
LITTLE MASTER RUU!!
WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE STARS IS THAT UGLY LITTLE FOUR-LEGGED CREATURE?
RAVENNA? PERHAPS WE SHOULD CONSIDER ESCAPING WHILE WE CAN.
IF SHE GETS AWAY, THE SOLDIERS WILL TAKE IT OUT ON US.
TRUE.
SO YOU CAME TO RESCUE ME, HMM?

CATCH HER!
DAMMIT! TAKE TH--

KAIN ...?
SHALL WE GO?
RUNE IS WAITING FOR YOU.
YES, LET'S GO!

A FIRE ?!
WHOA!
I THOUGHT HE WAS JUST A REALLY GOOD DOCTOR. BUT THEN HE CAME AND SAVED ME AND I SAW HIM FIGHT AND...
RUNE ...!
DID YOU KNOW ABOUT KAIN?
THIS WAY!
RUNE ...?
YEAH...

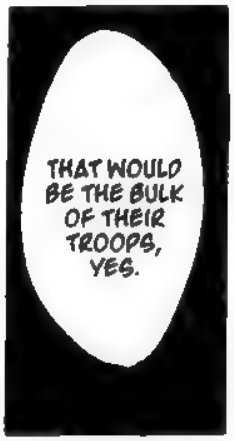
I SEE...
YOU KNOW HOW RESEARCHERS TEND TO GET LOST IN THEIR WORK AND FORGET THE OUTSIDE WORLD?
THERE ARE ALL SORTS OF DIFFERENT DIVISIONS IN THE CIRCLE, WITH PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE FOR DOING DIFFERENT THINGS.
WELL, IN ORDER TO KEEP THEM SAFE WHILE THEY'RE STUDYING, PEOPLE WITH, AH, MILITARY EXPERIENCE, ARE NEEDED. LIKE KAIN.
YOU KNOW, I THINK KAIN IS STILL A REALLY GOOD PERSON AT HEART.


I NEVER WOULD HAVE EXPECTED BRIGION SOLDIERS TO COME THIS FAR SOUTH ACROSS THE DESERT.
NOW THIS IS CERTAIN-LY A SURPRISE.

WE HEARD ONE OF THE SOLDIERS SAY THE "MAIN FORCE" WOULD BE HERE SOON.

RIGHT NOW, THERE ARE ONLY A FEW THOUSAND OF THEM.
BUT I SAW SIGNS THEY'RE READYING FOR A WHOLE LOT MORE.

IF THAT IS TRUE...
...THEN IT SEEMS THEIR ATTACK ON TOLBAT IS NOTHING MORE THAN A DIVERSION. THEIR TRUE GOAL IS TO INVADE THE WEST.


THAT WOULD BE THE BULK OF THEIR TROOPS, YES.

WITH GRAAL AS THE GRAND PRIZE, NO DOUBT.
WE BADLY UNDER-ESTIMATED BRIGION.
NOW THAT THEY'VE CONQUERED MOST OF THE SMALLER NATIONS TO THE EAST, THEY HAVE A HUGE BASE FROM WHICH THEY CAN CONSCRIPT TENS OF THOUSANDS OF TROOPS.
PLUS, THEY'RE OPERATING WITHOUT THE RESTRAINTS THAT THE STAR QUEEN PUT ON KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIMENTATION HERE IN THE WEST. THEY'RE OBVIOUSLY LEAPS AND BOUNDS AHEAD OF US IN THE USAGE OF POWERFUL FIRE-POWDER WEAPONS.
JUST FROM WHAT I SAW, THEY HAD PLENTY OF THOSE TUBE-WEAPONS THAT EASILY LET A SINGLE MAN KILL A DRAGON.

THEY'LL PROBABLY ROLL RIGHT OVER KAGWELL'S EXCUSE FOR AN ARMY AND MOVE STRAIGHT ON TO GRAAL.
WAIT!
THE DRAGON KNIGHTS AND EUSIS ARE STILL IN KAGWELL!
ALL THEY HAVE ARE SWORDS AND SPEARS, BUT IF THE BRIGION ARMY ATTACKS, THEY'LL FEEL OBLIGATED TO FIGHT BACK!
THEY WON'T STAND A CHANCE!

WE HAVE TO HURRY!
LEAVE WARNING EUSIS TO ME.
WE HAVE TO WARN EUSIS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE!
I'LL GO.

Chapter 31:
What the Knight Has to Say

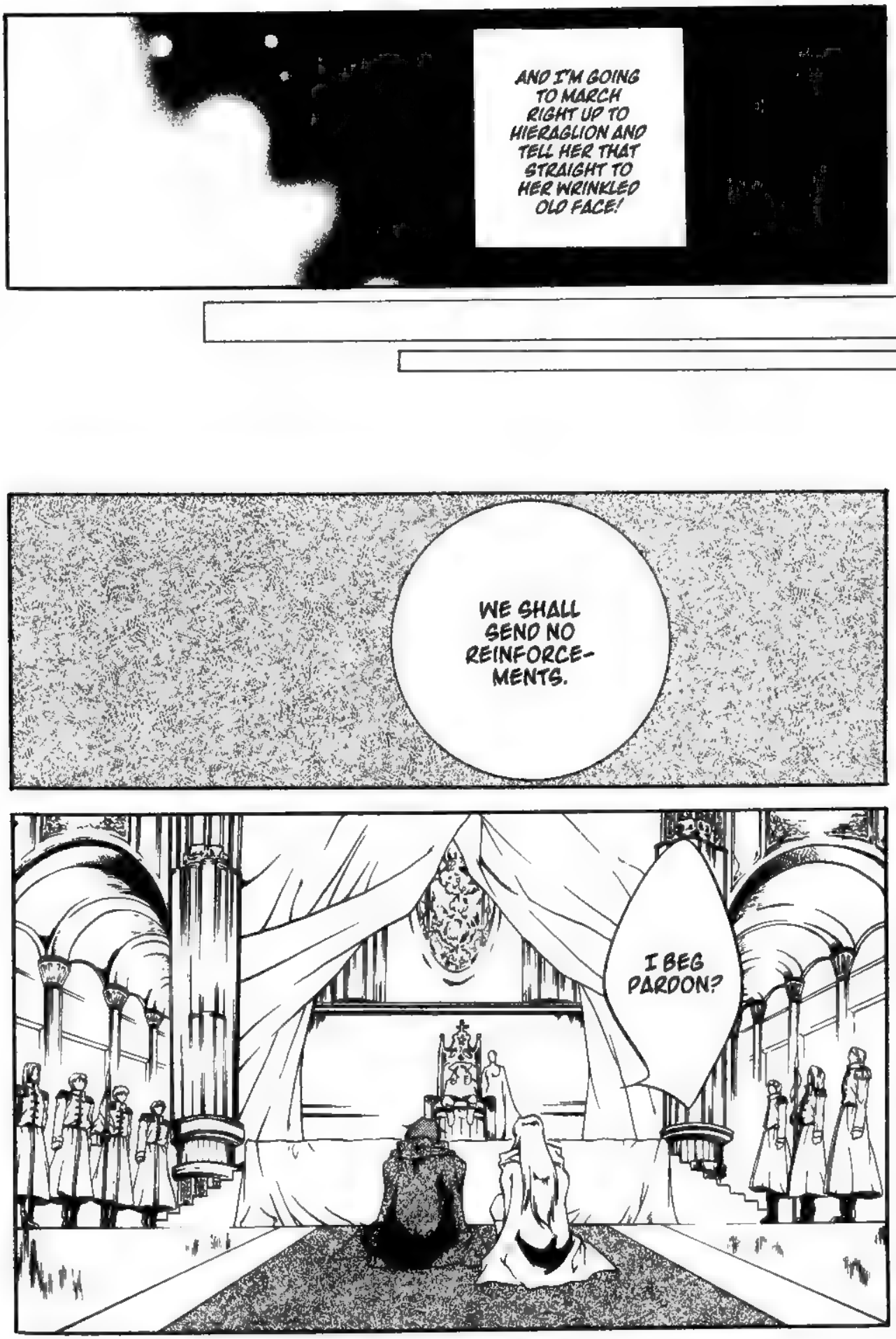
LEAVE WARNING EUSIS TO ME.
I'M GOING WITH YOU!
KAIN, TAKE CARE OF FIRIEL, OKAY?
WE PROMISED, REMEMBER?! WE WERE NEVER GOING TO BE SEPARATED AGAIN!
GET HER BACK TO THE CIRCLE'S HEADQUARTERS SAFELY AND--
HOLD IT!!

WE--
JUST KNOWING YOU'RE SAFE WILL BE AN IMMENSE HELP TO ME, FIRIEL.
RU--!!
DON'T WORRY. I'LL COME BACK TO YOU.
I PROMISE!

WHY...? WHY DOES IT HAVE TO BE THIS WAY...?
THE ONLY REASON I CAME ALL THIS WAY WAS TO BE BY HIS SIDE!
FIRIEL...
I GAVE UP EVERYTHING FOR HIM! A POSH LIFE IN THE PALACE, MY FRIENDS, EVERY-THING!
I CHOSE HIM OVER ALL THAT I HAD!
BUT HE GOES AND LEAVES ME BEHIND SO HE CAN TRAIPSE ON UP TO KAGWELL AND GO SEE EUSIS!!
THAT DOES IT! NOW I'M MAD!

IF HE'S GOING TO GO OFF AND CHEAT ON ME WITH EUSIS...
UM... FIRIEL...?
DON'T YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE MISREADING THINGS SLIGHTLY...?
...THEN, DAMN IT ALL, I'M GOING TO CHEAT ON HIM BACK!!
THE BARD.
THE STAR QUEEN'S BARD!

INCLUDING THE FACT THAT BRIGION'S TRYING TO SURPRISE-ATTACK US FROM THE SOUTH!
SINCE THE STAR QUEEN SENDS HIM AROUND TO SPY FOR HER, SHE HAS TO KNOW EVERYTHING THAT'S GOING ON AROUND HERE.
HE HAS SOME SORT OF STRANGE POWER THAT LETS HIM TRAVEL HUGE DISTANCES IN A REALLY SHORT TIME.
SHE DOESN'T HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE THE STAR QUEEN!!
SHE HAS TO KNOW IT'S HAPPENING, BUT SHE'S JUST SITTING BACK AND LETTING IT HAPPEN!
IF RUNE AND EUSIS GET IN TROUBLE OR WORSE BECAUSE SHE REFUSED TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT A PROBLEM THAT SHE SAW COMING MILES OFF, THEN I'LL NEVER FORGIVE HER!


AND I'M GOING TO MARCH RIGHT UP TO HIERAGLION AND TELL HER THAT STRAIGHT TO HER WRINKLED OLD FACE!
WE SHALL SEND NO REINFORCE-MENTS.
I BEG PARDON?

AMOS, THE KING OF KAGWELL
DO NOT MAKE ME REPEAT MYSELF, YOUNG SIR.
TRUE DRAGON KNIGHTS NEED NOT CALL IN UNNECESSARY REINFORCEMENTS.
THEIR HONOR LIES IN DEFEATING DRAGONS BY THEIR OWN HANDS.
IS THAT NOT CORRECT...
...HIGH COMMANDER LEANDRA?
OF COURSE, YOUR MAJESTY. IT IS AS YOU SAY.
EUSIS, ENOUGH.
BUT, YOUR MAJESTY--!

LOOK AT HIM-- SOULLESS, SPINELESS.
IT'S USE-LESS.
LOT...
LITTLE MORE THAN PRINCESS LEANDRA'S PUPPET NOW.
AND SHE'S CHEVIAT. OF COURSE SHE'S GOING TO DO EVERYTHING SHE CAN TO HINDER ROLAND'S INTERESTS HERE.
DAMMIT...!
EVER SINCE SHE WAS INSTALLED AS THE ARMY'S HIGH COMMANDER...
...OUR SUPPLIES AND FUNDING FROM THE COURT HAVE BEEN SLASHED AND SLASHED AGAIN.
IT SEEMS THE DAY WE CAN FINALLY RETURN TO THE PALACE JUST GETS FARTHER AND FARTHER AWAY.

ADALE...
YOU'RE FIGHTING THERE NOW, AREN'T YOU? JUST AS I FIGHT HERE.

WELCOME BACK, SIR!
CAPTAIN EUSIS!

HMM. WE'RE GETTING MORE RECRUITS BY THE DAY.

CLAUD, SIR! I JUST JOINED UP TODAY!
SEEING EVERYTHING YOU DRAGON KNIGHTS WERE DOING, I JUST COULDN'T STAND BACK AND DO NOTHING, SIR!
HMM? I DON'T BELIEVE I'VE SEEN YOU BEFORE.

HIERA-GLION.
THE ROYAL COURT THERE HAS ITS OWN KIND OF BATTLEFIELD.
ONE EVEN MORE BRUTAL AND RELENTLESS THAN THE FRONT LINES ON WHICH WE MAKE OUR STAND HERE.

LORD EUGIS, WELCOME BACK!
...SO THE ABLE YOUTH OF THE KINGDOM INSTEAD COME STREAMING INTO GRAAL'S COMPANY OF DRAGON KNIGHTS.
YES, IT IS QUITE IRONIC, ISN'T IT?
THE REGULAR KAGWELL ARMY WON'T LIFT A FINGER TO SAVE ITS OWN NATION, DESPITE THE OBVIOUS DANGER THREATENING IT...
WELCOME BACK, SIR!
WELL, WE DO SHARE A COMMON GOAL OF PROTECTING THE HELPLESS FROM THE DRAGONS. NEXT TO THAT, ONE'S NATIONALITY MEANS LITTLE.
Care to join us Lord Eugis?

WHO'S THERE?!

YOU'RE ALIVE!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
AND HOW DID YOU KNOW THESE WERE MY QUARTERS?
EASY THAT PHOTO.
OH.
RUNE?!

LET ME TELL YOU THIS STRAIGHT OFF.
FIRIEL IS ALIVE AND WELL.
FIRIEL ...!
SHE'S ALIVE...!
ALONG WITH ME, SHE'S JOINED THE CIRCLE OF HERMES.
SHE'S WHAT?!
YOU CAN'T SERIOUSLY THINK YOU'LL GET AWAY WITH THAT! FIRIEL IS NOT A WOMAN YOU CAN KEEP TO YOURSELF!

HOW DARE YOU?!
YOU'RE A HERETIC AND AN ASSASSIN! YOU DON'T HAVE ANY RIGHT TO HER!!
I CAN BECOME AN ASSASSIN OR ANY OTHER EVIL WITH A DISTURBING AMOUNT OF EASE.
EXACTLY.
ROBBERY, ABDUCTION, MURDER...
MY EARLIEST MEMORIES ARE OF BEING RAISED BY A GANG OF THIEVES PRETENDING TO BE GYPSIES.
ALL OF THOSE THINGS AND MORE WERE JUST A NORMAL PART OF MY UPBRINGING.
JUST FIRIEL. HER, I WILL HAVE.
I DON'T WANT ANYTHING ELSE FROM THIS WORLD.
I KNOW.
BUT ON THIS ONE POINT, I WILL NOT BUDGE.
FIRIEL WILL BE MINE.

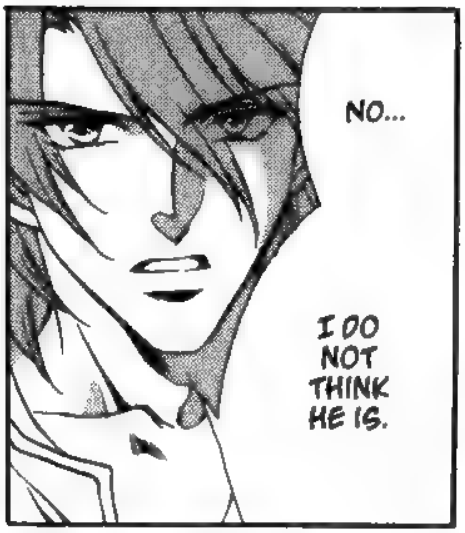
HAD I STAYED THERE...
...I KNOW I WOULD HAVE BECOME EXACTLY LIKE THEM.
BURIED IN DARKNESS...
I WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST FOREVER IF I HADN'T MET THE PROFESSOR AND FIRIEL.
...THEY WERE THE FIRST LIGHT EVER TO REACH ME.
FIRIEL WAS LIKE THE BRIGHT, BLINDING SUNSHINE ITSELF.
EVEN AFTER I LEFT THEM AND TRIED TO SINK BACK DOWN INTO THE DARKNESS...
...FIRIEL WOULDN'T LET ME GO. SHE CHASED ME AND FOUND ME, BRINGING THE LIGHT OF THE SUN WITH HER.
AND THE PROFESSOR SHOWED ME THE JOYS OF LEARNING UNDER THE SOFT MOONLIGHT.

SEEING HER VANISH INTO THE WALL MADE ME REALIZE ONE IMPORTANT THING.
...AREN'T WORTH KNOWING.
TO ME, THE TRUTHS OF A WORLD WITHOUT HER...
HOWEVER, BEFORE I CAN HAVE HER, I MUST FIRST BECOME WORTHY OF HER.
AND SINCE SEEING YOU DIE WOULD MAKE HER CRY...
...I'VE COME TO WARN YOU.
I'LL SAY IT AGAIN. FIRIEL WILL BE MINE.

THE BRIGION ARMY IS ALMOST HERE. THEY WILL TRY TO INVADE KAGWELL ANY DAY NOW.
SAY WHAT...?
THEY'RE STILL FIGHTING TOLBAT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DESERT!
BRIGION? HERE?
Ha ha ha!
THAT'S RIDICU-LOUS!

I NEED TO HAVE A WORD WITH YOU.

GARLAND.


NO...
I DO NOT THINK HE IS.

AND THE PROOF?

IS IT NOT HIGHLY POSSIBLE HE IS LYING TO YOU, MY LORD?

I HAVE DIFFICULTY BELIEVING THAT COULD BE TRUE.
RUNE SWEARS HE SAW IT.

THE BRIGION ARMY, MY LORD?

"...SINCE SEEING YOU DIE WOULD MAKE HER CRY..."
FIRIEL.
"...I MUST FIRST BECOME WORTHY OF HER..."
IT IS CERTAINLY DIFFICULT TO CALL HIM A TRULY GOOD PERSON...
...BUT WHEN IT COMES TO PROTECTING FIRIEL, HE IS DEADLY SERIOUS.
ENOUGH TO OVERWHELM EVEN ME...
YOU'RE ALLOWING HIM TO SLEEP HERE WITH US?

HMM...
...HE CERTAINLY LOOKS QUITE DEFENSELESS AND ANGELIC WHEN HE SLEEPS.
FOR A DESPICABLE HERETIC AND ASSASSIN ACCUSED OF REGICIDE...
WELL, WE CAN'T JUST TOSS HIM OUTSIDE TO SLEEP UNDER A BUSH.
TRYING TO SUCCESSFULLY RUN THIS UNDER-MANNED, UNDER-SUPPLIED AND UNDER-FUNDED CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE DRAGONS GIVES ME MIGRAINES ALMOST EVERY DAY.
I FIND IT QUITE UNFAIR.
THAT'S HARDLY AMUSING, LOT.
I, FOR ONE, WOULD VERY MUCH LIKE TO SLEEP AS HE DOES--LIKE AN INNOCENT BABE WITHOUT A CARE IN THE WORLD!

I GUESS IT IS BECAUSE THE ROLAND NAME MEANS LITTLE HERE.
THE SOLDIERS HERE TRUST AND RESPECT ME FOR MY SKILLS, NOT JUST BECAUSE OF MY RANK OR FAMILY. KNOWING THAT IS A PLEASANT FEELING, FOR CERTAIN.
MY UNICORN...
...A PARTNER WITH WHOM I SHARE A BOND OF TRUST THAT GROWS DEEPER BY THE DAY.
YOU MAY BE WORKED TO DEATH, BUT YOU'RE FAR MORE ALIVE THAN IN THE COURT.
I AM...?
SOLDIERS WHO HAVE FACED DEATH WITH ME AND STAND ON NO CEREMONY...
HUH. PERHAPS THAT IS TRUE.
LOYAL COMRADES...
THIS SOAP IS NEARLY USELESS.
IT ISN'T DOING A THING AGAINST THESE STAINS.
SORRY, SON. AIN'T NO HELP FOR IT.
THAT SOAP IS PART OF THE BATCH LADY IGRAINE BOUGHT.

Ha ha ha!
SHE'S A REGULAR BARGAIN-HUNTING QUEEN, Y'KNOW. IF SHE CAN'T KNOCK A PRICE DOWN TO ROCK BOTTOM, SHE AIN'T BUYIN' IT!
I'M A REGULAR WHAT?

IGRAINE...

HOW DARE YOU SHOW YOUR FACE TO ME AGAIN?!
WHAT HAPPENED TO FIRIEL IS YOUR FAULT!!

FIRIEL IS ALIVE.
.....
TRULY...?
SHE SEEMS TO BE ENJOYING EVERY DAY, FROM WHAT I CAN TELL.
ALIVE AND WELL.
WHERE IS SHE?!
OH, GENTLE GODDESS, THANK YOU!
TRULY...
...FIRIEL IS...
...ALIVE ?!

I WILL NOT LET HER BE TAKEN BY YOUR FOUL DARKNESS!
BEWARE!
BEWARE!
TRAITORS HAVE INVADED OUR RANKS!
MORE WRETCHES FROM THE STAFF OF THE SERPENT!
DALE!
DAN!

HOLD! ALL OF YOU HOLD!!

YES. IT WAS EXACTLY AS YOU SAID.
AT A QUICK GLANCE, THERE APPEAR TO BE SEVERAL THOUSAND OF THEM-- PREPARING FOR MORE!

YOU SAW THE ARMY?

WE HAVE BIGGER PROBLEMS RIGHT NOW!
SOMEBODY INFORM THE YOUNG MASTER THAT I MUST SPEAK WITH HIM AT ONCE!

THEY CLEARLY HAD MANY WEAPONS CAPABLE OF KILLING EVEN DRAGONS!
THEY'RE NO RABBLE, EITHER. THEY'RE A DISCIPLINED FORCE OF ELITE TROOPS, MAKING SWIFT AND ORDERLY PROGRESS ALONG AN INCREDIBLY DIFFICULT ROAD.
SHOULD THAT ARMY DECIDE TO INVADE, KAGWELL WOULDN'T STAND A CHANCE!
NO, MY LORD.
IT APPEARS THAT KING AMOS CANNOT BE BOTHERED TO SPARE ANY ATTENTION FOR THE SOUTH.
AND WITHOUT HIS MAJESTY'S POWER, IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO ORGANIZE ANY RESISTANCE UNDER A COMMON BANNER.
WHAT?! THE KING REFUSES TO MOBILIZE KAGWELL'S ARMIES AT ALL?!

THEN THESE ARE KAGWELL'S FINAL DAYS.
MY LORD, WAIT A MOMENT!
THERE IS ONE GENTLEMAN WHO WISHES TO JOIN OUR CAUSE!
GOOD DAY, GENTLEMEN.
I AM WILTS BAUDWIN, CAPTAIN OF THE KAGWELL ARMY, 13TH DIVISION.
I HAVE HEARD MUCH PRAISE CONCERNING YOUR SUCCESSES AGAINST THE DRAGONS.
CAPTAIN, I AM GRATEFUL FOR YOUR OFFER...
...BUT I CAN HARDLY ACCEPT. TO JOIN US WOULD COMPROMISE YOUR STANDING WITH THE KING.
WE HAVE DISASSOCIATED OURSELVES FROM THE CROWN.
CONCERNS OVER THE KING'S FAVOR ARE MOOT, AS INACTION NOW MEANS WE WOULD SOON NOT HAVE A KING WITH WHOM TO CURRY SAID FAVOR.

SIR, THE THING A SOLDIER FEARS MOST IS NOT THE ENEMY...
...IT IS BEING ORDERED TO A WORTHLESS DEATH BY A FOOLISH COMMANDER.
YOU, LORD EUSIS, ARE NO MAN'S FOOL.
YOU HUNT DANGEROUS AND UNPREDICTABLE GAME, YET YOUR CASUALTIES ARE KEPT TO A MINIMUM.
YOU ACCEPT EVERY NEW RECRUIT, AND RUN A DISCIPLINED BUT HARMONIOUS CAMP.
I AM NAUGHT BUT A COMMON SOLDIER, SIR...
...I WILL BE THE FIRST TO ADMIT THAT. HOWEVER, I LIKE TO THINK I KNOW A GOOD GENERAL WHEN I SEE ONE.
LORD EUSIS, YOU LEAD A SUPERB COMPANY.
ALL 400 MEN IN MY UNIT AGREED, SIR.
THE KAGWELL ARMY 13TH DIVISION IS AT YOUR FULL DISPOSAL.

HOW WONDERFUL!
400 MEN.
THAT DOUBLES OUR NUMBERS.
HOWEVER...
...THE OPPONENT HAS THOUSANDS. PERHAPS TENS OF THOUSANDS.
HOW DO WE FIGHT THAT...?
DRAGONS.
LET A HERD OR THREE OF DRAGONS RUN LOOSE IN THEIR MIDST.

THE ONE THING WE HAVE THAT THEY DON'T IS UNICORNS.
IF WE CAN MANAGE TO HERD A FEW MEAT-EATERS INTO THEIR RANKS...
...THEN WE CAN VERY LIKELY DRIVE OFF THEIR WHOLE ARMY, EVEN WITH OUR SMALL NUMBERS.
IT'S LIKE CHESS.
THE FIRST FEW MOVES PRACTICALLY DETERMINE THE ENTIRE MATCH.
INTEREST-ING!
End of Book
6

★ Postscript ★

All sorts of stuff happened while I was working on this volume, such as "The Good Witch of the West: Astraea Testament" anime starting! (Congratulations!) I got sick with the flu, and suddenly every day was filled with fun and interesting things. (Huh?!) Strangely, ever since I got flattened by the flu, drawing has seemed so much more fun to me. Even right after deadline I'd be doing nothing but sketching. I mean, Firiel-chan is so absolutely adorable! ♡ ♡ And Adale is so cute! I can't help it! ♡ ♡ ♡ In fact, I get so caught up in drawing nowadays that when I finally remember to look up at the clock, I realize I've spent way, way, way too much time on one page. Yipes!

The end may be in sight, but I'll keep working and having fun 'til the last page!

Tonight's Halloween!

2006.10.31

Haruhiko Momokawa

To all of you who have read this book and to everyone who supported me and cheered me on and to all my friends who are still my friends even though I keep saying I can't hang out (s-sorry...!):

THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU

May happiness find you all!!

• A Favorite Scene From the Drama CD •

Adale-chan, dressed up as a little country girl.
She looks so unbelievably cute when she runs!

Dear Mother,

Rune and I are together again and facing the greatest challenge of our lives. When Brigion invades Kagwell, will we be able to stop them? Will I finally be able to talk to my Queen Grandmother? Thank the stars I have so many comrades to depend on—Eusis, Igraine, Adale—but will I be able to depend on them forever?

Firiel Dee

In the Next

THE GOOD WITCH OF THE WEST™